ABSTRACT

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FIVE BLACK WOMEN WHO STARTED AND COMPLETED THEIR DOCTORATE OF HUMANITIES AT CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY WHILE IN MIDLIFE: AN AFROCENTRIC PARADIGM OF SUCCESS

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Literature that defines midlife is quite fluid in definition. The start of midlife used in this study was age forty-five. Most women in midlife in the 21st century as an aggregate, are living longer, healthier, multifaceted lives.

It is significantly rare to find dialog or defined research space for midlife Black women in higher education. Relatively few studies investigate Black women's personal relationships that encourage and support successful outcomes. This study addresses the gap in the research that frames the impact of an Afrocentric point of view called Communal Cognitive Clusters as it relates to participants in the success of Black women's obtainment of the doctorate while in midlife.

Five Black women who obtained their doctorate while in midlife were the study participants. An in-depth analysis of their Afrocentric support systems called communal

cognitive clusters was done by interview and demonstrated through a tactile exercise using two adapted convoy models. One model indicated who the supports were ten years prior to the degree. The other model indicated who the supports were at the time of completion of the degree. This gave a deeper sense of the roles, type of support, movement between the two models as well as providing an introspective thoughtful conversation. The results indicated that family members were the greatest support to these study participants along with close friends and in one case a family dog. Institutional support came from staff and classmates. Being a non-traditional student led to leadership and mentoring roles in their individual classes. Maat and generativity were key components to their success. Time to graduation was within the maximum 10 years to completion with the exception of two study participants who had serious health challenges that forced 12-year completion rates.

This study is replicable, and I encourage looking at Black men in midlife in higher education as well as other ethnic groups. A longitudinal study would be appropriate to follow these students from entry in the doctoral program to completion. This study should also serve to educate, influence, and motivate those who are contemplating a return to higher education in midlife.

FIVE BLACK WOMEN WHO STARTED AND COMPLETED THEIR DOCTORATE OF HUMANITIES AT CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY WHILE IN MIDLIFE: AN AFROCENTRIC PARADIGM OF SUCCESS

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BY

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"The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want!" (S)he always has my back! Asante Sanaa to the Queens who ruled Kemet and those ancestors who braved the Atlantic Ocean so that I could live. Gratefulness goes to my grandmother, Reverend Irene V. Moore for tenacity, my mother, Lydia Watts Jones, master educator and her communal cognitive cluster who sat at her kitchen table, Helen, Bernice, and Ethel. Thanks go to my aunts, Geneva, Big Ma, and particularly my tenacious Aunt Nannie who always sat at the table with the men. I thank my dad, Emerson Leon Watts, who with opportunity could have been the first Dr. Watts and my brother Raphael. My enduring love goes to my daughter, Mia Danielle for her continuous encouragement, my granddaughter, Alahna-Noelle Amoah, who represents the honesty of my present, and dear Dash Amoah, my great grandson, the heart of my future. Thanks go to Reverend Cecil Chip Murray and Dr. Josephine Bradley who always believed in me. I thank my personal communal cognitive cluster for never losing faith in me when I was losing faith in myself. I thank my committee who put up with my disruption for what I felt was right and to faculty and staff who always had a word of encouragement. Special thanks go to my study participants. They gave "A little bit of personal experience to illuminate larger truths."[1] Lastly, I thank Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, scholar-activist and my muse. Ase Ase Aseo

1. Elizabeth Alexander, "We Must Be About Our Father's Business," Anna Julia Cooper and the In-Corporation of the Nineteenth-Century African-American Woman Intellectual, *Signs 20*, no.2 (Winter 1995): 336-356, accessed March 17, 2020, UTC http://Jstor.org/stable/3174952.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this researcher's studies related to Africana women, it was discovered that Black women of the early 20th century used their tenacity and persistence, despite all odds, to successfully place race, family, education, and community in the forefront of their lives. The first four Black women to obtain their PhD—Beatrice Eva Dykes and Georgianna Simpson in 1921, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander in 1922, and Anna Julia Cooper in 1925—were exemplars to this study. However. one woman in particular stood out as it relates to this study. Anna Julia Cooper started her doctorate in mid-life at age fifty-seven. Her doctoral degree was conferred December 29, 1925, at the age of sixty-seven.[2] She became the muse for this study on Black women starting and successfully completing their doctorate in midlife.

Midlife is a significant time in any women's life. It has been described as a transitional period of multiple life factors that could include psychological and physical challenges. This transition also brings a sense of empowerment and liberation. There is also an increased awareness of the aging process and one's own mortality. It is an important period to understand the factors that influence their life satisfaction. The concept of generativity and the commitment to leave a legacy for those friends, family,

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1. Stephanie Y. Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 2007), 120-138.

and community becomes vital. Midlife can be perceived as both a time of loss of the familiar and a significant turning point with new roles and experiences."[2]

Many career changes occur during this period of transition. Understanding these changes is essential to the well-being of midlife women. Midlife career changers experience challenges and support issues relative to those transitions. The strategies used to manage those changes may include the type of support systems that are described in this study.

The Black women in this study received their doctorate in Humanities between 2006 and 2013. All of these women started and completed their doctorate while in midlife. There are many reasons to study and examine the lived experiences of this cohort of Black women. There is a sociological perspective in studying their support systems that encouraged their successful completion of the doctorate. That perspective utilizes Molefe Kete Asante's Afrocentric paradigm of support called communal cognitive will.[3] The iteration of the Communal Cognitive Cluster was added to articulate from a location of a group dynamic of support in which the term cluster has been added as referential to the concept. It will be identified throughout the study as CCC. It is that group interaction and reaction that initiates the dialogue from an Afrocentric contemporary lens. The life course of these five Black women is relevant considering the

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2. Carol A. Darling, Catherine Coccia, and Natalie Senatore. "Women in Midlife: Stress, Health and Life Satisfaction," *Journal of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress 28*, no. 1 (February 2012): 31-40; Catherine A. Cherrstrom and Mary V. Alfred, "Women's Midlife Career Transition to Tenured/Tenure-Track Faculty in Adult Education," *Adult Education Quarterly 70*, no. 1 (July 2019): 44-63.

3. Molefi Kete Asante, *African Intellectual Heritage: A Book of Source* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 45-84.

multiplicity of roles Black women play during their specific life course.[4] All in this cohort have been breadwinners and caregivers. Some have dealt with society's racist, sexist, and ageist misconceptions while pursuing their degrees. Their academic persistence and ability to thrive is supported by the roles played by friends, family, and associates known as their personal communal cognitive clusters.

Women in Midlife

Literature that defines the age midlife begins and ends is quite fluid in definition. Hunter, Ski, Neugarten, and Rogers use ages 40-60.[5] Santock uses the term "mid-adulthood" as his explicative for a contemporized reference to the aging process.[6] Others have defined the age of mid-life as the ages of 35-55 and 41-59 categorizing them as "young boomers."[7] There are others who use the parameters of 55-79 to define mid-life from their perspective referring to the subjects of their research as "older adults." Because of the fluidity of these numbers the starting age used in this study was determined by scholarly consensus within the literature consulted as age forty-five.[8] The politics of age and identity is influenced by women in general. However, women no

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4. Charisse Jones and K. Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 60-92.

5. Ski Hunter, Sandra S. Sundel, and Martin Sundel, *Women at Midlife* (Washington, DC: NASW Press, 2002), 8-9.

6. John W. Santrock, *Life-Span Development,* 17th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2019), 5-832.

7. Demographic Profile of America's Younger Boomers – MetLife, accessed March 7, 2017, https://www.metlife.com/…/mmi-younger-boomer-demographic-profile.pdf.

8. Mary Beth Lakin, Laura Mullane, and Susan Porter Robinson, *Framing New Terrain: Older Adults & Higher Education* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2007), accessed February 6, 2015, http://www.acenet.edu/ciii/reinvesting.

longer follow a prescribed life script of what a woman is supposed to do or feel at a certain age that is highly influenced by others. All women as an aggregate have determined by their own standards that they are multi-faceted.

Historically, age was not a clearly defined element of life. The emphasis of early research was initially on childhood and the elderly or end of life discussions. Then the progression from childhood became discussions on the young group, age 20+ and the old group, age 60+. Mid-life was situated somewhere between younger and older generations. In 1964. Carl Jung proposed that there was an expansive area of research related to adult development in midlife. He was followed by more extensive work from Erikson who coined the phrase "life course." The categorical explicative he presented for this period of time became the frameworks for discussions of this ever-increasing population of people. Societies and researchers interested in midlife started looking seriously at this age dimension in the 1980s when U.S. demographics changed. Fluidity of this phenomena created theoretical frameworks such as stage and phase theories, holistic individualistic and many others determined by the theorist and their academic disciplines. Levinson, a counter researcher felt individuation for men was significant and he couched his comments about women by saying that there were two types of women. Type one women were traditionalist. Type two women were anti-traditional.[9] The 1980s witnessed heated discussions between the patriarchal and the matriarchal debaters on the inequities in research findings related to mid-life and the misconceptions of how to clearly understand women's lives and their close attachments. Men were using male

9. Yahy Aktu and Tahsin Illhan, "Individual Life Structures in the Early Adulthood based on Levinson's Theory," *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice 17*, no.4 (2017): 1383-1403.

subjects as the qualifier. It was male based and inappropriately adopted as the standard for all midlife progression.

Women were completely ignored, and Black women not even considered as they were invisible to the vocabulary and circumstances of women of the times. Black women once again took a back seat to the controversy going on between White male and female researchers about Black women's lives as homogenous to White women. Caveats were often that the study of men could not be generalized to women without further research and paradoxically how knowledge would be enhanced if they were able to find the participation of women of color.

More research is occurring on midlife because the U.S. census report for 2010 places the population of people who are between the ages of 40-59 at 86 million hence more attention is being paid to this group. Researchers are reporting that the multiplicity of life-style changes, cognitive functioning and well-being has turned the discussions to midlife as a developmental period of time. It is considered a pivotal period in the life of this age grouping that is multifaceted and multi-dimensional. It is still being said that midlife remains vague in its interpretation. Since midlife technically begins at age 45 it is significant that for each chronological decade added there is now a loss of a decade starting with 60 being the new 50. Studies on midlife compare and clearly define what midlife looks like now compared to 20 years ago. The studies emphasize a perception that promulgates the view of how old one feels and looks does not have to match the one's chronological age. It is all in the perception of which age group people think you belong in. Framing mid-life has become more esoterica than realistic. People are living

longer, have healthier lifestyles, and are using many techniques to create mental and physical well-being. This period of time is also multidimensional. It requires looking at demographics, ethnicities, influences and the health and well-being of life. In summation, middle age is a turning point in one's life that is subjective and self-defining.

There is reassurance that with good health or health that is under control, positive well-being allows everything else to fall into place. Once again, there is limited evidence on Black women's educational response to this period of the life cycle. It is hard to determine exponentially how this affects their return to higher education as an aspiration. None of the primary resources are very specific about this issue making the return to higher education a phenomenon that also appears as an anomaly. The reasons for returning to higher education for Black women are numerous. Those reasons include divorce, empty nest syndrome; the loss of job, notions of unfulfilled intrinsic ambitions, intellectual stimulation, career development, changes in roles and responsibilities, and the upward financial mobility of family.[9] Anna Julia Cooper in the 19th century shared much of the same inertia for education. However, this research does not address the aforementioned issues. Those issues are significant for further research on Black women re-entering higher education while in midlife.

Black women, particularly in midlife are often part of the aggregate discussion as if women were homogenous. A compilation of 232 research studies on midlife women done in 2001 clearly indicated that only 9.28 percent included Black women in their

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10. Nancy Deutsch and Barbara Schmertz, "Starting from Ground Zero: Constraints and Experiences of Adult Women Returning to College," *The Review of Higher Education 34*, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 477-504.

studies.[11] Literature related to Black women in midlife as it specifically relates to re-entry into higher education at the doctorate level is extremely limited. Most books, articles, and studies refer to Black women in higher education at the professorial, dean and executive levels. They address issues of tenure, building relationships, and salary inequities but none investigate the intimate relationships that encourage success.[12] It is significantly rare to find a dialog or defined space specifically for midlife Black women in higher education. This study's primary focus analyzes Black women's friendships and the nature of their collective communal cognitive clusters. The typology of the support they receive in response to the issue at hand, the completion of the doctorate, will illuminate the quality, quantity, connectivity, and impact the group has on success. It will also acknowledge what level of understanding the women have of the Afrocentric concept of communal cognitive will. It is an important discussion for the purposes of this research and is explored in Chapter Two.

Black women's health experts, Dr. Marilyn Hughes Gaston and Dr. Gayle K. Porter" in their foundational book, *Prime Time the African American Woman's Complete Guide to Midlife Health and Wellness state,* writes, "We meaning Black women are inundated with sexism and racism that manifests itself in hypertension and other stress

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11. Ski Hunter, Sandra Sundel, and Martin Sundel, *Women at Midlife: Life Experiences and Implications for the Helping Professions* (Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers, 2002), 277-340.

12. Marilyn Hughes Porter and Gayle K. Gaston, *Prime Time: The African American Woman's Complete Guide to Midlife Health and Wellness* (New York: The Ballentine Publishing Group, 2001), 68.

related diseases that affect Black women as a collective."[13] These deficiencies are not always handled well during this time of life. How it is interpreted and managed by Black women is challenging because it is communal discussions that locate them in the margins of American society. In her book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks talked about marginality. She described the Black women in the margins as maids, janitors, and prostitutes. However, these five Black women study participants are not the maids, janitors, and prostitutes hooks referenced. Possibly hook's statement can be considered a metaphor that is inclusive of all Black women no matter their positionality in society. The women in the study represent Black professional women who have their own marginality defined within the intersection of institutional racism and sexism. There were two health crises described by two of the study participants that are directly related to the aforementioned discussion. Those events discussed were handled as constructive and instructive issues as they pursued the doctorate. Two other participants were focused on the possibility of promotional opportunities upon completion of the degree where they faced institutional academic racism, sexism, and ageism. These specifics are discussed in the analysis in Chapter IV.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the subjective experience of five Black women at Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia from 1986-2016 who started and completed their terminal degree of Doctor of Arts in Humanities while in midlife and the

13. Porter and Gaston, *Prime Time: The African American Woman's Complete Guide to Midlife Health and Wellness,* 68.

impact the Afrocentric concept of support called Communal Cognitive Cluster had on their successful completion. These five Black women represent a microcosm of non-traditional students returning to higher education. The greater demand for college-educated workforce brings many adults to college."[14] Non-traditional midlife students represent a growing trend of untapped resources to support enrollment goals and diversification of university populations.

There are many reasons for returning to pursue the doctorate degree at a time that happens to be midlife. Scholars cite generativity, change of social status, advancement of career goals, increased earning potential, career changes, empty nests, and divorce, as some of the myriad of reasons women use when considering returning to higher education. "Others see education as a necessary step in transitioning from one life stage to another."[15]

Clark Atlanta University was the location for the convenience sample. As of May 2018, Clark Atlanta University conferred eighty-eight Doctor of Arts and Humanities (DAH) degrees since 1987, the year of the consolidation of Clark College and Atlanta University creating Clark Atlanta University (CAU).[16] It is important to note that at the time of inception, the DAH degree was initiated as a terminal degree designed to be an alternative to the traditional research based Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and the

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14. Deutsch and Schmertz, "Starting from Ground Zero," 477-504; Shawna M. Patterson-Stephens and Tonisha B. Lane, "Black Doctoral Women: Exploring Barriers and Facilitators of Success in Graduate Education," *Higher Education Politics & Economics,3*, no.1, accessed December 19, 2019, https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/aphe/vol3/iss1/5.

15. Deutsch and Schmertz, "Starting from Ground Zero," 477-504.

16. CAU Commencement Programs, 1987-2018, Robert W. Woodruff Library Archives.

education-based Doctor of Education (EdD). Historically, this degree was proposed at a 1932 meeting of the Association of American Universities. In 1967, Carnegie Mellon University began to offer the Doctor of Arts (DA). The first DA was awarded in 1968. This degree was considered a teaching doctorate and offered scholars the knowledge and diversity to teach in their respective fields. According to the "Red" Book at CAU, the "DAH program is to prepare prospective teachers for college teaching of the humanities and to prepare scholars for research related to humanistic inquiry and pedagogy."[17] The DAH was replaced in 2014 with a PhD in Humanities.

Statement of the Problem

The median number of years to complete a doctorate degree in the United States as of 2017 measured by when they started graduate school is 7.5 years. The average age of completion of the doctorate is 33 years old. There is an untapped market of potential graduate students that have entered the enrollment discussions nationwide. The potential non-traditional student population, often called the "Younger Boomers or "Trailing Edge" Boomers born between 1959 and 1964, represented 27,403,993 in 2009, will increase to 24,026,689 by 2030, and make up 6 percent of the total population. Eleven percent of that population will be Black.[17]

Black women and their pursuit of the doctorate in midlife is not clearly represented in the literature as being a part of these numbers. The strategy should be to

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17. K. B. S. Barrow, 2008 Clark Atlanta University, *The Doctor of Arts and Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Program Handbook for Students*, aka the "Red Book," p. 1.

18. Demographic Profile America's Younger Boomers–Metlife, accessed March 7, 2017, https://www.metlife.com/…/mmi-younger-boomer-demographic-profile.pdf.

recruit, support, and retain the non-traditional student. This is a relevant topic to explore as movement into the second decade of the 21st century brings historical change to the numbers of women in midlife who are pursuing higher education goals.

This research is specific to Black women in midlife who are a mosaic of lived experiences. This research looks at a specific conceptual component of that mosaic, their personal sources of support that help to retain and maintain them while in pursuit of the doctorate. The perspective is from an Afrocentric positionality.

There has been limited research on a specific significant form of social support. It is the purposeful acknowledgement and recognition authors of books, dissertations, and theses give to those circle of friends, colleagues, and family who have been meaningful contributors to their success. That support could also include dedicated faculty mentors, caregivers to children, editors of their documents, as well as spiritual conduits of faith.

The primary foci in this study is expressed through the voices of five Black women in midlife and their lived experiences pursuing the doctorate degree at Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia from 1986-2016. This preliminary study utilized a small purposeful sample to begin to examine the subjective non-traditional student experience. The focus was on examining the components of their personal support system from an Afrocentric, Africana Womanist and Black Feminist sociological perspective using an Afrocentric variable called communal cognitive clusters. This study begins to correct and connect current knowledge related to the education of Black women that has placed them in an overall marginal position within a subscribed worldview. The intent of the study was to begin to support and encourage Black women to pursue higher education

particularly the doctorate in midlife. How it is interpreted and managed by Black women is challenging because it is conventional discussions that usually place them in the margins of that discussion. However, it is an important discussion for the purposes of this research and is explored in Chapter II.

Health issues for Black women in midlife appear to be the primary areas of discussion in the literature. It is clearly a consensus by scholars writing about Black women's health that physical health is a primary discussion and is a significant element in the equation of what constitutes well-being. Samples of this feature will be explicated further in the study. The events referenced were handled constructively. There were also instructive issues of value from a specific support mechanism as they pursued the doctorate. Two participants were focused on the possibility of promotional opportunities upon completion of the degree. Therefore, the discussion of intrinsic values and upward mobility is highlighted in the analysis in Chapter IV.

Black Women in Midlife

Research is evolving on Black women in midlife although scant compared to the discussions on women in general. The discourse on Black women should be different than that of a homogenous group of women. The experiences and struggles are different and need to be clearly defined. In the realm of discourse on women's health, there is a generality of age and gender specific issues that lend itself to a universal thought that all women have the same basic issues in dealing with midlife. An inordinate amount of research is dedicated to White women's health issues as universal to all women thus creating a disparity. Researchers have found that there are significant differences in how

Black women and White women manage the intricacies of midlife. Even though there are extenuating circumstances on both sides there are more primary sources and studies done on White women in midlife. Therefore, the focus of this research is solely on midlife of Black women and their support systems while going through and obtaining the doctorate degree.

When discussing Black women, the start should be the consideration of how well-being plays a vital role in being successful. Homage is given by all primary sources discussing well-being to The Black Women's Health Project (TBWHP) founded in 1981 in Atlanta, Georgia, as the pioneers who looked at the health concerns of Black women of all ages. In 1983, the National Conference on Black Women's Health Issues sponsored by TBWHP founders crystalized the need for Black women to begin to find their voice and to assist in the creation of ways of helping to heal themselves. The work was with all Black women no matter where they were in the life cycle. The research and efforts towards Black women in midlife created a catalyst of national communal effort to deconstruct, demystify, mitigate and put Black women back together in order to celebrate this stage of the life cycle. The focus was on thinking about good health "as being much more than the mere absence of disease."[19] Black women began to take themselves seriously for the sake of themselves, family and community. The work of the TBWHP spawned others to look inward addressing the problems that lead to poor health and stress that incapacitated Black women who historically were and still are the backbone of the community. Public health had become not just issues of physical disease but the

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19. Linda Villarosa, ed., *Body & Soul: The Black Women's Guide to Physical Health and Emotional Well-Being* (New York: Harper Perennial A Division of HarperCollins Publishers. 1994), xi.

casualties of violence, racism, and sexism. Loving self and a commitment to self- help techniques became the mantra across the country in an attempt to alleviate chronic disease that plagued Black women by the time they entered midlife. This self-work also opened the mental capacities for finding opportunities of upliftment and enlightenment. It also helped women exchange a victim role for a victorious one as they face the hard issues of the top five health issues and disparities that has hit the Black community of women. It was through the early works of the BWHP that created the research, writings and messages of hope that alerted all Black women no matter where they were in the life cycle that there was hope reflected in all the categories of their lives.

Villarosa's book, *The Black Women's Guide to Physical Health and Emotional Well-Being*, is a comprehensive and liberating look into the health and lives of Black women from the body politic, safety, reproduction, health care, emotional wellbeing and loving oneself. The book also has specific conversations related to Black women in midlife as they address "Our Bodies Growing Older."[20] But this also focuses on health and self-care. It is a very gentle but firm Afrocentric comprehensive book. Compared to the total book this section is concise and has the clarity that is intended to motivate the reader to pursue additional knowledge on the areas being addressed. This is a book that focuses on health however the Afrocentric nature of communalism and community, family, and spirituality flows through the descriptive pages and pictures that accompany them. Villarosa carefully educates Black women regardless of age all the areas that they should be aware of. Since this is the earliest of the primary resources it appears that the

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20. Villarosa, *Body & Soul,* 122-139.

intent was to be dedicated to all women but not age specific. The message was holistic in nature with a clear Africana Womanist construct. A specific example is the reference to "Afrocentric Toys and Games for Black children in the chapter called "Loving Our Children" and the inclusion of Black men as partners and help mates in "Loving Our Men."[21] These are the Afrocentric principles that Clenora Hudson Weems and Molefi Kete Asante discuss in their formative works on Afrocentricity and Africana Womanism. Although the directness of subject matter on education and progress is not specific, those areas are infused with the contention that without health, spirituality, self-esteem, and all the other attributes one cannot proceed to age gracefully.

There is considerable concern that through many lifestyle changes that go with the aging process that a considerable number of Black women depending on their socioeconomic status have begun to feel the constrictor of poor diet and lack of exercise which exacerbates chronic disease. By the time Black women reach the ages of their late 40s early 50s, they have succumbed to the top five health challenges: cancer, heart disease, diabetes, stroke and kidney disease. Hoyt and Beard's, The Black Women's Health Study, and the Black Woman's Health Imperative,[22] have made that the focus of their work with Black women, particularly because of the high mortality rates from those conditions. It appears that discussions around causes of social stress i.e. changes in the economy and marital status continue to exacerbate prime health conditions. It is

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21. Villarosa, *Body & Soul,* 426-440.

22. Eleanor Hinton-Hoytt and Hilary Beard, *Health First! The Black Woman's Wellness Guide* (Carlsbad, CA: Smiley Books, 2012), accessed November 15, 2018, http://www.bu.edu/ bwhs/2016/01/ winter-2015-2016-newsletter.pdf.

instructive that all of these dangers and anticipations are not necessarily age related because it is a universal challenge for all ages of adult Black womanhood. Some of the statements admonish the reader to avoid denial about their health and even feel that some of the challenges are normal for their age group. Here it is suggestive that family responsibilities also affect health with either raising grandchildren, assisting elder parents, and/or assuming roles of the super Black woman. These are categorically descriptors for many adult Black women no matter the age.

I found all of the authors had positive elements to their discussions on Black women's health that related to efforts to support positive well-being. Brief discussions on the benefits of communal social support from family, friends, and community was incorporated in all the primary resources related to Black women's health universally but not mid-life specific in many cases. The Africana womanist communal collective is significant to ways of managing this part of the life cycle.[23] When discussing these types of support, the Afrocentric paradigm, Communal Cognitive Clusters is clearly interconnected with the Black women's discussion on health and lifestyle, the sister circles, without using the Afrocentric terminology. Patricia Hill Collins highly advocates for the comfort of daily sisterhood conversations to affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist. This is part of the mosaic of theoretical frameworks working synergistically.[24] The lifestyle changes that occur have more of a socioeconomic determinant related to health in midlife. It is the extenuating circumstances of race,

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23. Villlarosa, *Body & Soul,* 426-440.

24. Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 102-103.

entitlement, and gender that appear to be the real issues in the discussions raised from the Black researcher's perspective related to changes that occur in midlife. There is the addition of spirituality to conversations about Black women's health and life cycles.

This body of research is specifically centered on the impact of communal cognitive clusters in the community of Black women in mid-life who successfully start and complete the doctorate degree and the impact that those clusters have on their success. The issue being addressed is the lack of research in the Afrocentric and Black Feminist theoretical framework for this subject matter that clearly defines social support as communal cognitive clusters (CCC). This element of communal cognitive clusters requires a purposeful study, both critical social theories to determine relevance to the Black women's achievement of the doctorate. The results can be used to contribute to existing literature on Black women in midlife.

Conceptual Framework

The specific and purposeful acknowledgement and recognition given by authors of books, dissertations, and theses represent recognition to those circle of friends, colleagues, and family who have been meaningful contributors to their success. That supporter could also include dedicated faculty mentors, caregivers to children; editors of their documents as well as spiritual conduits of faith. All of these illustrate informal to formal social support networks no matter the naming. However, there has been limited research when examining Black women who start and receive their degree of doctorate in mid-life. This paucity is also significant in Afrocentric ontologies of support networks called Communal Cognitive Clusters.

This study looks at the impact of communal social support systems in the Afrocentric framework called communal cognitive clusters and will on their success. This researcher used the components of communal cognitive clusters (CCC) to frame the concept of the study participants individual personal cohort who come together with the singular purpose of academic liberation and success. It is their dedication and commitment to the success of the Black women being studied that gives power and direction of thought. This concept is defined as "The power of a group of people thinking in the same direction. It is a spiritual and intellectual commitment to a vision which constitutes the (communal) cognitive imperative."[25] CCC also uses components from the conceptual frameworks of Africana Womanism and Black Feminist Thought. In an exploration of Africana Womanism and Black Feminist Thought the theoretical frameworks had been seen to be critically opposed to each other. Hudson Weems focused on the concept of feminism that was purported by White women that did not reflect an Africana agenda. To add Black to that concept did not necessarily mean that there was an understanding of the responsibility to meet the needs of women of other ethnicities. The Africana Womanism agenda adds clarity to the mission and purpose in our Africanness and adds "originality to the collective voice of Africana women."[26] However, both add dimension and intersectionality to this discussion of Black women through the lens of the interconnectivity of politics and culture. Africana Womanism

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25. Ama Mazama, ed., *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2003), 56.

26. Clenora Hudson Weems, *Africana Womanism Reclaiming Ourselves* (Boston: Bedford Publishers, Inc., 1993), 4-5.

distinctly discusses Black women culturally from an Afrocentric perspective using as a framework eighteen fundamental characteristics that include family and communalism. Black Feminism addresses the critical political aspects of Black women's lives with emphasis on the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. Black Feminist thought adds the component of Black women from an oppressed, political, and dialectic activism[27] response that is not clearly delineated within the Africana Womanist framework. It is the intersection of the two theoretical frameworks that will broaden the discussion of Black women in midlife, communalism often synonymous with collectivism, and higher education. Both advocate the concept that Black women have unique but not identical experiences nor are those experiences interpreted in the same way.[28]

Afrocentricity, Africana Womanism, and Black Feminism

Afrocentricity is the belief in the centrality of Africans in post-modern history. It is our history, our mythology, our creative motif, and our ethos exemplifying our collective will.[29] An illustration for the case for Afrocentricity is the necessity to put Black Americans in the mindset and context of Afrocentricity while looking at the summation of authentic truthful historical facts that actually have explicit meaning regardless of the deluge of historic parallels and diversions. The social circumstances of the early 19th century after enslavement through post reconstruction continues into the 21st century.

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27. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000). 22-33.

28. Ibid., 27.

29. Asante, *Afrocentricity*: *The Theory of Social Change,* 11.

W.E.B. Du Bois, Ben-Jochannan, and others were the progenitors of the call for research and standards for Blacks. These scholars wanted to create an academic awareness and understanding of the Negro's historical context that located them in Africa. They encouraged Black scholars to teach from a cosmological, axiological, and spiritual contextual framework. It was their insistence that epistemological truth about Blacks would reveal a contextually defined spiritual, circular connection to Africa. They illuminated the landscape with proof that there is no homogenous worldview but a different worldview of nationalist magnitude that informs the world of scholarship and community teachings that all ethnicities had their own unique worldview that connected and acknowledged all ethnic perspectives.

There also was an emergence of significant interpretations of theoretical scholarship and activism regarding Black women that had been re-articulated on several levels by diverse groups of women and collectives in the 1960s and 1970s. Those iterations became the Black Feminist movement followed by a cultural theoretical epistemology, Africana Womanism, and Womanist Theology.[30] These frameworks emerged out of the masculinist attitudes perpetuated by the Civil Rights, Black Nationalist, and Black Panther Movements. It is the Black woman who was hesitant to speak against the machoism that infiltrated those movements. Black women appeared to be passive and silent even though they were a pivotal support mechanism to Black men. They were the Africana womanist framework that expounds on working with Black men and not against them for the sake of the community. The 1980s laid the groundwork for

30. Kalenda C. Eaton, *Womanism, Literature and the Transformation of the Black Community, 1965-1980* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 7.

the theoretical frameworks discussed in this study. The framework of Africana Womanism and Black Feminism. The scholar, Kalenda C. Eaton, used the term "Afro-Politico Womanism to explicate the collaboration of those frameworks to create a collective experience that prioritized the strength, survival, unity and health of the global Black community. It is the commit to the "survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female. The ultimate communal cognitive will of the people. Her defined terminology connected Black Feminist, Africana womanist and Alice Walker's Womanism.[31]

The Black Feminist Movement's community activism was a critical turning point looking at the Black perspective as a progressive move forward theoretically with potentially inclusive approaches. Also, during that time Afrocentrism became recognized as a relevant Black perspective and epistemology that put the historical components of culture into the equation. Black Feminism is now considered by some scholars as a reflection of multiple theoretical traditions, including African-centered thought, feminist theory, Marxism, sociology of knowledge, critical social theory, and post-modern theory. That crosses multiple disciplines and it is known for its intellectual and activist traditions.[32]

Afrocentricity was supported by forward-thinking Black scholars such as Molefe K. Asante, Maulana Karenga, Marimba Ani, Linda Myers, C. T. Keto, Asa Hilliard,

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31. Eaton, *Womanism, Literature and the Transformation of the Black Community,* 1-9.

32. Venus E. Evans-Winters, *Black Feminism in Qualitative Inquiry: A Mosaic for Writing Our Daughter's Body* (London: Routledge, 2019), 16.

Patricia Hill-Collins, Cornell West, Joseph Holloway, Nathan Hare, Na'im Akbar, and Wade Nobles.[32] The aforementioned scholars posited many forms of Afrocentrism politically and culturally as a way of contextualizing kambon, the study of Blacks from diverse academic disciplines that included history, psychology, and sociology. These scholarly writings, teachings, and advocacy added a profound critical assessment to Black life. Black Feministinist agreed with Afrocentrists that Blacks should be the subject and not the objects of research.[34] Also emergent was a surge of diverse Afrocentric theoretical frameworks and books in the 1980s that spawned from the writings of Asante who is in the lineage and part of the legacy of Dubois, Ben-Jochannan, Marcus Garvey and Amy Garvey.[35] It was their insistence and scholarship on the Black relationship to Africa that was a statement of added value to the Afrocentric perspective.

Molefi Kete Asante was the progenitor of the term Afrocentrism. To date, his work has been cited by scholars over 7,815 times. Mentors, Drs. Bracey and Meir addressed the times when Black intellectuals were supporting and giving credence to all

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33. Katherine Olukemi Bankole, "A Preliminary Report and Commentary on the Structure of Graduate Afrocentric Research and Implications for the Advancement of the Discipline of Africalogy, 1980-2004," *Journal of Black Studies 36*, no. 5, (May, 2006): 663-697, accessed July 28, 2015, http://www.jstor. org/stable/40026679.

34. Molefi K. Kemet Asante, *Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1990), 24-25; Queeneth Mkabela, "Using Afrocentric Method in Researching Indigenous African Culture," *The Qualitative Report 10*, no. 1 (2005): 178-189, accessed July 28, 2015, http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol10/iss1/10; James L. Conyers, Jr., ed., *Afrocentricity and the Academy* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 39.

35. Ula Y. Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press 2001), 6-238.

things African, particularly Egypt. They discussed how those intellectual Africanist points of view framed those discussions.[36]

Africana Womanism

"Africana Womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent."[37] Clenora Hudson-Weems' eighteen qualities or descriptors that compose the Africana Womanist Agenda was used as a thematic framework to categorize and discuss the responses of the participants in this study.[38] It is important to recognize within this study the discourse on Black women's experiences must be framed and assessed according to the canons of Afrocentricity. Analytically through Afrocentric authenticity of discourse discussions were specifically relevant to Black women as self-naming, self-defining and self-identifying subjects. The anchor is the concepts of cultural unity that reconstructs an African worldview as central to the reclaiming of family values, maat, and responsibilities from Black men and women working in concert with each other. This concept is validated in many ethnic groups in Africa in particular within the Shona and Ndebele ethnic groups as evidence that Africana Womanism is invented out of the substance of our African culture.[39] The Africana Womanist approach also focuses on

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36. John H. Bracy, Jr., and August Meier, "Black Ideologies, Black Utopia: Afrocentricity in Historical Perspective," *Contributions in Black Studies 12,* Article 13 (August 1994): 111-116.

37. Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves,* 157.

38. Ibid.

39. Itai Muwati, Zifikile Gambahaya, and Tavengwa Gwekwerere, "Africana Womanism and African Proverbs: Theoretical Grounding of Mothering/Motherhood in Shona and Ndebele Cultural Discourse," *The Journal of Black Studies, 35*. no.1 (2011): 1-8.

authentic sisterhood. This concept is in concert with the Afrocentric research methodology indicated in Chapter III.

Communal Cognitive Clusters (CCC)

There appears to be few primary resources that approach the issue of social support relative to success in higher education among Black women. Afrocentricity explains the phenomenon as communal cognitive will. The term "clusters" was added by this researcher to add to the term to signify groups of people moving in the same direction with the intent of supporting one individual's efforts. The concept of community or communal has been clearly stated in the Afrocentric worldview. The African worldview adds unique value to the discussion by adding the elements of attunement to nature, harmony, and spirituality. This added synergy also enhances longevity, mental and physical health, and all other characteristics that define relationships and their relativity to successful life span development and accomplishments.

The Black Feminist concept of communal cognitive clusters is affirmed in the use of the terms community and collectivism in scholarly writing on Black feminism and Africana Womanism. These active theoretical frameworks can be the political and cultural components within the framework of Afrocentricity.[40] Examples of this synergy are the political and social/behavioral concepts that focus on analysis and criticism while

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40. Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 110; Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 15; Sonja M. Brown Givens and Keisha Edwards Tassie, *Underserved Women of Color, Voice, and Resistance* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 1-184.

looking at how Black behavioral data is examined. Both Africana Womanism and Black Feminism examine social and behavioral issues. Both are ideologies of liberation from racial, sexual and class forms of oppression. However, Black Feminism is a direct-action movement of liberation politics within the intersection of race, gender, and class. Africana Womanism is the African centered social/cultural validation of values and standards of the Black community based on historical African ancestral memory. Hudson Weems contemporized the positionality of Africana Womanism by stating that an Africana woman is a "Black woman activist who is family centered."[41] Both ideologies address labeling and naming. However, Black Feminism continues to be problematic for some Black women to subscribe to simply because of feminism being in the title. This labeling debate has gone on since inception in the1960s. Scholar activist Venus E. Evans Winters aptly describes her feelings about Black Feminism as "institutionalized knowledge (and now a part of popular discourse) has been commodified and co-opted to a point that it might be too "centered" for my tastes."[42] It is the politics of language that may be separating those who support the Africana Womanist worldview which does not explicate politics and activism.

Because the primary theoretical framework for this study is Afrocentric, the components or Black Feminism will be discussed as it relates to the presentation of data,

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41. Itai Muwati, Zifikile Gambahaya, Tavengwa Gwekwerere, and Ruby Magosvongwe, ed., *Rediscovering African Womanhood in the Search for Sustainable Renaissance: Africana Womanism in Multi-disciplinary Approaches* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishers, 2012), 6.

42. Evans-Winters, *Black Feminism in Qualitative Inquiry,* 11-16.

analysis and the findings of the interviews of the study participants as it relates to themes and the research questions.

The discussion of communal cognitive clusters is framed by many disciplines. Sociology and psychology will be considered in this discussion. A review of the literature reveals a number of perspectives on communalism from Afrocentric scholars of Africology who embrace the tenants of communalism and collective consciousness. Within each theoretical iteration one can draw some very definite points of commonality. Afrocentricity, as a theoretical framework and belief system, requires the individual to understand, recognize, acknowledge and maintain community as a primary guideline which encourages a pursuit of communal uplift.[43] Historically, communalism was the conduit that was passed down from the root of African culture. The intent of communalism within the Black culture is identified as collective family and extended family support. Scholars who write about Black psychology emphasize that Black people are more altruistic and concerned about others based on their ontology of spiritual essence, collectivism, and interdependence. This set of ontologies connect Black people in positive ways. Wade Nobles' assertion was that the individual exists so that the group might survive and his or her individualism be realized by the prosperity of the group.[44] Naim Akbar shared similar thoughts as it related to communalism. He defined it as "survival of the tribe" or the principle of collective survival. Life is a concept of

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43. Ruth Reviere, "Toward an Afrocentric Research Methodology," *Journal of Black Studies 31*, no. 6 (July 2001): 709-728.

44. Reginald L. Jones, ed., *Black Psychology*, 4th ed. (Oakland, CA: Cobb & Henry Publishers), 47-57.

collective survival.[45] Twentieth century philosopher Maulana Karenga, the founder of Kwanzaa a celebration that started in the 1960s, instructs and gives definition to Black people through the seven principles of the Nguzu Saba. The third principle, Ujima, represents the concept of collective work and community responsibility. This is a reminder to Black people of the diaspora to remain true to duty and collective work and responsibility. It is synonymous with communal cognitive will purported by Molefe Kete Asante in the 1980s. Asante utilized the theme of communalism as a collective cognitive imperative and claims Afrocentricity as the logical outgrowth of the collective conscious will of the people. This collective consciousness establishes their perspective on communalism and collective responsibility.[46] His version of *I am because we are* is evident in his admonition that all good is to and from each other and the people. The primary view is that the good is never disconnected because to do well for self is to do well for the community. Asante draws the reader into the histrionics and positive relativity of working together in a communal way.

Ikuenobe, an African philosopher, defined communalism as ”people living together as a group in a specific location and sharing some commonalities of history, ideology, belief systems, values, lineage, kinship and political systems.[47] It is clear that in the twenty first century this belief system has given way to technology that connects

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45. Jones, *Black Psychology*, 47-57; Na’im Akbar, “The Evolution of Human Psychology for African Americans,” In *Black Psychology,* ed. R. L. Jones (Hampton, VA: Cobb & Henry Publishers, 1991), 99–123.

46. Molefe Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change,* revised and expanded 2nd ed. (Chicago: African American Images, 2003): 42, 52, 56, 86.

47. Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change,* 42, 52, 56, 86.

people no matter where they are in the world. Ikuenobe's definition holds true to Asante's version of communal with the addition of the usage of the terms cognitive will. Both Ikuenobe and Asante are looking at the macro concept of communal cognitive will that relates to major socioeconomic and political decisions and actions that benefit the larger group. The definition could also address major direct-action initiatives by a group (the communal cognitive cluster) that provides massive socioeconomic and political change. Some examples of that concept could be the Black Lives Matter and MeToo movements of today and the Black Panther movement of the past. It is the commonality of the support system that is primary. The support structure is also more personalized. Possibly the membership is composed informally with the elements of family, extended family, friends, and formal organizations (i.e., the church, and women's organizations). The reflection of communalism states it is "a system of thoughts, value, belief or ways of life and a method of inquiry, analysis, and acquiring of beliefs that require a philosophical analysis and articulation."[48] This examination of some of the different articulations of the communal way of life is reflective of the potential for the achievement of success.

Kobe Kambon, an Afrocentrist, discusses the naturalness of collectivity and the need for collective affirmations and validation over individual affirmations. Kambon's interconnectivity includes Black people and kinship in and outside of the family circles and ancestral manifestations of communalism. He explicates that the African cosmology

48. Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change,* 42, 52, 56, 86.

and worldview is one that is inclusive of the "Human- nature Unity."[49] Each scholar in the discussion explains their iteration of communalism which references collectivity as a term used interchangeably with communal. It appears that the most productive way to define Black relationships is from an African ancestral domain whose basic themes are collectivism, community, interdependence, cooperation, and mutual support. It is those tenants of communal cognitive clusters that promulgates the collective will necessary to accomplish goals that benefit the individual and the group.

Amos N. Wilson's diagram called "Afrocentric Versus Non Afrocentric Models of the African Family in America," points to the issue of basic themes where collectivism, community, interdependence, cooperation, group are key elements. The diagram is a model that helps in the understanding of the traditional African social organization. This diagram clearly reflects the concept of communalism as foundational to family. Because the issues of communalism and collectivity fall directly in the context of African/Black Psychology it is the clearest way of showing the connectivity and context to this study of communal cognizant clusters and success. Wilson has categorically determined that commitment, reciprocity, shared responsibility, accountability to group which highlights the relevance of the communal family concept. The model is juxtaposed against the Non-Afrocentric Approach which is the European worldview where the opposite is individuation, materialism, separateness, independence,

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49. Kobi K. K. Kambon, *African/Black Psychology in the American Context: An African-Centered Approach* (Tallahassee: Nubian Nations Publications, 1998), 130-135.

accountability to self and immediate family only.[50] Because the model of support used in my study is an adaptation of a Eurocentric model, there had to be a precise definition of inclusivity of family, extended family, friends, and others outside of the familial group as part of the construct. The possible commonalities of my study will be compared to the communal cognitive cluster of support which is depicted in Wilson's chart. I am adding the extended family as dictated in the study as a model of authentic African experiences whether it is known to them as such or not.[51]

Asante is not alone in the many articulations of communal cognitive will. An essential concept of African-centered psychology includes self-definition, spirit, nature, metaphysical interconnectedness, and communal order and self-knowledge. For our purposes communal order refers to the reciprocal relationship between knowledge of self and connection to community. It is this African-centered model that informs our understanding of what constitutes an African reality structure, mental health and mental illness, spiritual health and well-being, adaptive behavior, and optimal psychological functioning. The 1980s brought change in psychological treatment protocols for Black people. Former treatment protocols did not consider the unique differences of Black people versus mainstream. The protocols were culturally deficit and the tools to measure outcomes were faulty.

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50. Shawn O. Utsey, Benita Belvet, and Nicole Fischer, "Assessing African-Centered (Africentric) Psychological Constructs A Review of Existing Instrumentation," in *Handbook of African American Psychology,* ed. Helen A. Neville, Brendesha M. Tynes, Shawn O. Utsey (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009), Chapter 6.

51. Ibid.

Scholars who wrote about Black Psychology also emphasized that Black people were more altruistic and concerned about others based on their ontology of spiritual essence and collectivism; interdependence and the understanding that there is a oneness of being. In African society, the cognitive group included the family and extended family. Wade Nobles contention is that the individual exists so that the group might survive and his or her individualism is realized by the prosperity of the group.[52] The concerns of the individual above the group would be deviant or undesirable behavior. Na'im Akbar shared similar thought as it related to communalism. He defines it as "survival of the tribe" or the principle of collective survival. Life is a concept of collective survival.[53]

This theme of communalism resonates within numerous Black scholars.[54] Na'im Akbar, Wade Nobles, and Kobi Kambon laid the foundation for the empirical studies that began to proliferate during the 1990s. Because of these efforts, an increase in the number of empirically based African centered studies related to communalism conducted from the period beginning 1990 and ending in 2015 began to inform psychological and sociological disciplines.

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52. Jones, *Black Psychology*, 47-57.

53. Jones, *Black Psychology*, 47-57; Akbar, *The Evolution of Human Psychology for African Americans,* 17-40.

54. Molefe K. Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1988), 48-54; Nobels, Wade. "Africanity: It's Role in Black Families. *The Black Scholar 5*, no. 9 (1974): 10-17. Madonna G. Constantine, and Rebecca Redington, "Counselling and Psychotherapy with African Americans," in *Handbook of African American Psychology,* ed. Helen A. Neville, Brendesha M. Tynes, and Shawn O. Utsey (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2009), 431-444; Polycarp Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 16-20; Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism,* 14-18.

Walter R. Allen's empirical studies on Black students in graduate and professional schools noted that there was a lack of research in the area of communalism. Allen's study, done 25 years ago, related to Black students in higher education but there was no major discussion related to the type of support Black students, particularly women received from their families or extended families. The assumption was that Black women in graduate school were more impacted by non-traditional support. But the type of non-traditional support was not defined. There was a missing social dimension to the research.[55] This example is one of the indicators that there was a paucity in the research at that time. There is mention of several studies done from 1969 to 1984 on the production of Black success, each giving causal factors for success. Allen's findings do not discuss outside support systems such as spouses, parents, extended families although there were discussions within those studies that perhaps their personal background had something to do with their success. Finding research data that spends more than a few sentences on the communal cognitive support expression is difficult. Most define support as predominately family with an emphasis on spousal support. However, scholars that discuss the educational success of Black people that obtained higher education goals in the 18th - 19th century always give credit to family support and the church albeit that affirmation only exists in a sentence or two.

Discussions on support is usually found in the introduction of books and research documents as affectual to the importance of whatever subject is being high-lighted (i.e.,

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55. Walter R. Allen, ed. *College in Black and White: African American Students in Predominately White and Historically Black Public Universities* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 10-322.

abolition, slavery, lynching, etc. When one reads books, dissertations, theses, or any other personal writings there is always an acknowledgment page that personally thanks individuals for their support. These individuals could be considered the writer's communal cognitive cluster.

There are many components to the Afrocentric framework of communal cognitive clusters that give statements of the importance of the centrality of family, friends, church, and community as essential to the success of the individual being discussed. The actual term may not be used, focused on the development but in discussions of family one has to look at the term with a micro causation assessment.[56] The macro concept of communal cognitive clusters is the guide to the discussions of the micro communal cognitive clusters of the women being studied. The macro's level of potential magnitudinal success can be comparable to the micro's individual success coming from the support of personal communal cognitive clusters. The results are all relative.

The communalism construct was widely discussed by Black scholars in the sociology and psychology literature in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Those prolific writers, Na'im Akbar, Robert L. Williams, Wade Nobles, Molefi Kete Asante, Delores Aldridge, Ana Mazuma, Clenora Hudon-Weems, and Kobe Kambon attested to the histrionics and necessity to return to the Afrocentric communal ideology in attempts to bring normalcy back to the Black family. They laid the foundation for the empirical

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56. Wilhelmina Manns, "Supportive Roles of Significant Others African American Families," in *Black Families*, ed. Harriette Pipes McAdoo (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 198-213; Rose Merry Rivers, and John Scanzoni, "Social Families Among African Americans: Policy Implications for Children," in *Black Families*, ed. Harriette Pipes McAdoo (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 333-348.

studies that began to proliferate during the 1990s. A number of those studies focused on the development and validation of assessment instruments to improve African-centered constructs. The result was scholars from all disciplines had access to more empirically sound tools to assess constructs related to the personality and behavior of Black people.

Two studies were impactful to the resurgence of the construct of communalism. They support the reason for this study. In an attempt to define and measure communalism, the Communalism Scale was developed in 1997 to assess and construct the validity of Afrocultural communal values, such as feelings of responsibility to a social group and an interdependence with others within the group. It is this study that gave an explicit definition of communalism and its implications for styles of learning and work environments. Conclusions of the study identified greater success for individuals who worked within supportive groups with the same values and outcomes.[57]

Twenty years later, the Communalism Scale 2015 Cultural Validity Study was used to assess the validity of the previous Communalism Scale study done in 1997. A revision was completed that reduced the original five dimensions of communalism determined in 1997 to two. Both studies validated the emphasis on sharing and contributing in Support of the Group and that the rescaled communalistic definitions which continued to positively relate to Black community involvement and well-being continued to be valid. It was purported that through this review the continuation of sound Black/African collective identity measures could be codified. This study in 2015 created

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57. Helen A. Neville, Brendesha M. Tynes, and Shawn O. Utsey, ed., *Handbook of African American Psychology* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2009). 75-88.

culturally accurate measurement models, conceptual and contextual designs for all disciplines when studying Black people. This study also had very broad implications that extended the need for scholars conducting research on communalism to use this revised instrument no matter the size of the investigation.[58] Because this dissertation's study is a small phenomenological study, the Scale Item responses noted in the 2015 study are relational and will be considered in the analysis.

The lack of research on communalism as a support factor affects all levels of Black research from the individual, family, group, community, nation, and the world. This creates the necessity to fill the gap that still exists in the literature particularly related to the missing factors of multi-dimensional communal support and its effect on individual and community success. The epistemology of Black women's collective connectivity of communal knowing through historical observation presents insightful alternative ways of knowing, healing, triumph and challenge. Because communal cognitive cluster support is so expansive the focus going forward is on the Black woman's pursuit of the doctorate in mid-life and how the Afrocentric paradigm communal cognitive clusters manifest success.

This study critically exams communal cognitive clusters historically and its relativity to current structures of support for Black women. Very little data have been collected to adequately address the issue of Black women in midlife and higher education. This study examines, analyzes, and illuminates consistent with an African understanding, a different worldview on this subject matter. It informs and adds new

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58. Nyasha Grayman-Simpson and Jacqueline S. Mattis, "Communalism Scale 2015 Cultural Validity Study," *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* (2017): 163-171.

knowledge to many disciplines particularly within Humanities. There is a synergistic merger with other seminal work on Black women's achievements utilizing the subject's personal narratives on how they made it over—the journey to the doctorate. The indicators and factors communal cognitive clusters have on success gives clarity to the uniqueness of Black women and inform and challenge future research. This study provides the interconnectedness between the historical location, experience, collaboration and guidance that comes from historical memory. It presents and informs using a different ethnic vocabulary that focuses on self-actualization via the illuminated communal cognitive cluster context. This study, in an African-centered theoretical perspective, gives Black women the information to evaluate themselves through their own authentic, original context and perspective as the subjects and not the objects of research.

There is a unique sensibility in the quest for a new epistemology that engages and assists in the understanding of more than one world view. There continues to be a need to further the understanding that there is more than one way to analyze human culture particularly if that culture has been intentionally underrepresented.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do Black women in mid-life adopt the decision to re-enter higher education?

RQ2: How do the women in this purposeful study interpret their support networks using the terms and definition of Communal Cognitive Clusters?

RQ3: How is time to graduation affected by active Communal Cognitive Cluster support?

RQ4: How does the intersection of being Black and female in midlife and a nontraditional doctoral student impact the completion of the doctorate?

These questions are analyzed and discussed in Chapter IV.

Limitations of the Study

This research only looks at Black women at Clark Atlanta University's Doctor of Arts and Humanities Program who started and completed their doctorate in mid-life between the years 2006-2018. These are qualitative case studies. This research is not an attempt to indicate that an overwhelming number of Black women who start and complete their doctorate in midlife are on one accord as it relates to their support systems (i.e., communal cognitive clusters).

This investigation examines the Afrocentric theoretical framework of communal cognitive clusters to understand relevant factors that influenced the participant's successful completion of the doctorate while in midlife. There is a limited examination of any additional forms of support that emerge from the narratives and may have some significance to the study. This study does not focus on aspects of mentoring as an approach to successful completion of the doctoral degree.

Conclusion

There is a paucity of published research on the intersection of social support networks and educational success of Black women who started and completed their doctorate while in midlife. There are also no known studies that address this issue and

the use of communal cognitive clusters in the Afrocentric, Africana Womanist, and Black Feminist literature. The concept of communal cognitive clusters should have great influence on interpersonal and social behaviors of Black people. The amount of support given by the communal cognitive cluster has been shown to be productive in resolution of personal issues that have been shared within this group. There is a cross-section of reciprocation from support that when used in an academic situation could possibly improve academic self-efficacy while in the doctoral program. It also provides a model for lowering attrition rates when there is a codified support system in place.

Chapter I has provided an overview of the study to include the purpose, problem statement, conceptual framework, research questions, and limitations. Molefi Asante's Afrocentricity, Clenora Hudson-Weems Africana Womanism were introduced and explicated as the major theoretical frameworks. Black Feminism was added as complementary to the mosaic intricacies of being a Black woman. This chapter adds substantial research related to an acknowledgement of the African worldview and the need for this type research in the 21st century, particularly related to Black women in midlife. Chapter II is a review of literature that provides current literature relevant to the content and research questions that impact this study. Chapter III utilizes qualitative research methods and criteria from an Afrocentric research methodology framework. It is an effort to illuminate the study's design and data collection methods that were performed. Chapter III demonstrates the use of a phenomenological research design that will address the impact of the use of Molefi Asante's Afrocentric support system communal cognitive clusters on successful completion of the doctorate. This chapter also

includes the selection of study participants, the intended method of analysis that include procedures to justify the validity and trustworthiness of the analysis of the narrative submissions. The subjects answered questions within an adapted network of social support called the Convoy Model. It will illustrate roles, size, and hierarchy of supportive relationships that make up the communal cognitive cluster within a ten-year span. Documentation of variables measures variances in the levels and responses of individual support over a ten-year span of time starting with communal cognitive cluster support ten years prior to the attainment of the doctorate and culminate with the attainment of the terminal degree. Chapter IV presents the data. Chapter V gives an analysis of the findings, drawing conclusions, and making recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The pursuit of the doctorate is multifaceted and complex. The term intersectionality can be used as it emphasizes the multidimensional oppressive experiences among Black women as ways of experiencing life and it can also mean Collins' definition of an "interlocking matrix of relationships."[1] The experiences can also be situated within Hudson Weems conceptualization Africana Womanism as cultural characteristics of Black women as they progress through life. It is to be noted that the literature responses to the research questions do not necessarily imply oppression and do not always specifically state the response should be considered Afrocentric. It is this researcher's contention that when discussing Back women's lived experiences, it is all relational to the Afrocentric and Black Feminist perspective. This is further proof of the mosaic positionality of Black women as they proceed through all phases of their lived experiences. This focus is on the multidimensional components. Empirical information is scant related to non-traditional Black women re-entering into higher education while in

1. Selena T. Rodgers, "Womanism and Afrocentricity: Understanding the Intersection," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment 27*, no. 1-2 (2017): 36-47.

midlife. However, currently "Black women received more than 10 percent of doctorates awarded in 2016-17."[2]

The definition of non-traditional re-entry students is universal and is clearly defined as students returning to school who are adults. They return to school either full-time or part-time while maintaining responsibilities such as employment, family, and other responsibilities of adult life; 50 percent of re-entry graduate students are over the age of 30.[3] Our study participants are age 45 and over as defined in Chapter I. The following discussions refer to women in midlife as non-traditional students.

There have been some aging issues that have gained prominence regarding the non-traditional re- entry into higher education. It has become more influenced by a cultural term that is now being described as a new stage of life emerging. This new stage of cultural identity is highly influenced by the personal achievements of those in the midlife demographic. It is the emergence of a "third age" population that emerged after the Second World War. This population in general share some common interests and experiences. Women of color share their own unique interests and experiences that are indicative to them as a separate population of women. Those interest include self-care, well-ness, and opportunities of generativity.[4] Also a part of this phenomena has created a new wave of returning students to academia. This non-traditional student since 1970

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2. Juhanna Rogers, "A Seat at the Table: Womanist Narratives of Black Mothers in Doctoral Programs," *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education 18*, no. 1 (September 2019): 87-108.

3. Xi Lin, "Barriers and Challenges of Female Adult Students Enrolled in Higher Education: A Literature Review." *Higher Education Studies 6,* no. 2 (2016): 119-126.

4. Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs, "The Third Age and the Baby Boomers: Two Approaches to the Social Structuring of Later Life," *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life 2,* no. 2 (2007): 13-30.

has been an older female returning for a graduate degree. The study participants are part of this new identity called "third age" which focuses on generational lifestyles and thought processes that focus on their future. Also, a part of this generation's concerns are the dilemmas of midlife and the need not to think about the consequences of aging. As older women continue to enter graduate school in greater numbers, their engagement with education is motivated by changing careers and finally being able to follow educational aspirations.[5] Sometimes it is the roles they have played in the first part of their lives that have become a catalyst to return to educational activities. Despite challenges that Black women face in the academy the obtainment of the doctorate is motivational, challenging, and beneficial.[6]

The following literature review surveys the four research questions that include responses to the re-entry of nontraditional students in midlife into higher education at the graduate level, the benefits, barriers and challenges, time to graduation, in addition to Afrocentric support networks called communal cognitive clusters. The inclusion of conceptual frameworks consisting of Afrocentricity, Africana Womanism and Black Feminist thought accompany the discussion. Existing research largely examines the undergraduate experience. However, women aggregately now receive nearly half of all

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5. Benie B. Colvin, "Where is Merlin When I Need Him? The Barriers to Higher Education Are Still in Place," *New Horizons in Adult Education & Human Resource Development 25*, no. 2 (2013): 19-32.

6. Sheila R. Jones, "Creating Our Own Stories and Trusting Our Own Voices: Midlife, Black, Female Doctoral Students Navigating the Crossroads of Age, Race, and Gender," (PhD diss., Texas State University, 2017), accessed February 20, 2019, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

doctorates and within group data the indication is that Black women acquire almost 70 percent of the doctorates conferred to Black students.[7]

Scholars who study doctoral motivations and persistence find that there are many factors that influence the choice to return to higher education after delays. The barriers and challenges to these doctoral achievements with the addition to how it effects well-being are being examined in higher education research; however, there is still much to be explored and understood.

This research uses a deductive approach to outline the applicable literature used to examine the experiences of midlife Black women who start and complete their doctorate while in midlife. The review surveys literature that answers the four research questions. It looks at the history of Black women in education and the utilization of communal cognitive clusters as support mechanisms to successfully complete the doctorate. Challenges, barriers, and motivation to complete the doctorate for this population are explored as well. The research presented attempts to support the multiple perspectives and interconnectedness of success and support that could impact the experiences of doctoral students in midlife. It is implicit in the constructs of the mosaic of Afrocentricity, Africana Womanism, and Black Feminism. These women have found it critical to emphasize their personal experiences within the multi-dimensions of the intersectionality of culture, race and gender. It is explicated through the literature that

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7. National Center for Education Statistics, Doctoral Degrees Conferred by Postsecondary Institutions by Race/Ethnicity and Sex of Student: Selected Years, 1976-77 through 2016-17, Table 324.20 (Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Education, 2018), accessed January 15, 2020, http://www. https://nces.ed.gov/ programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_324.20.asp.

these components are necessary to authenticate Black women's everyday experiences.[8] These constructs "emphasize Black women's intrinsic need for self-definition, self-valuation, naming, and reaffirmation in the Afrocentric analysis of their lived experiences. The components of this literature review indicate how the success of these reentry midlife Black women can be achieved. Because of the paucity in relevant literature some reviews will be generalized to all women in midlife as re-entry participants in higher education.

Historical Context of Black Women in Higher Education from Africa to America

> "It is impossible for a scholar to deal effectively with either the cultural/aesthetic or the social/behavioral concentrations without attention to the historic impact and achievement of women within the African community." Molefe Kete Asante[9]

Black Women in Higher Education - America

Black women have been dealing with the barriers of the intersectionality of gender, sexism, racism and class as part of their daily lives before enslavement. Women's entry into higher education was complex but not as complex, regulated and often uncertain as Black women who encountered the intersectionality of gender, class, and race by both Black and White men of the times. The muse for this study, Anna Julia Cooper's Doctorate was almost thwarted by Booker T. Washington. His attempt to suppress Ms. Cooper's doctoral conferment because of a difference in philosophical and

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8. Selena T. Rodgers, "Womanism and Afrocentricity: Understanding the Intersection," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment 27*, no. 1-2 (2017): 36-47.

9. Molefi Kete Asante, *African Intellectual Heritage: A Book of Sources* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 257.

sociological points of view resulted in her being confirmed at the Sorbonne in France instead of the United States.[10] Her history was not unlike many Black women academicians of the times of continued restrictions and delimitations based not upon merit but because of gender. Those barriers have not changed from the time of enslavement through the 21st century. Those same barriers have created social attitudes that create or recreate racist and gendered macroaggressions against women of color. Those macroaggressions have turned into a social phenomenon associated with ancestral memories of the abuser brought upon Black men and women while enslaved. It is described as brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative prejudicial slights and insults toward any group, particularly culturally marginalized groups.[11] This is a politically correct title to centuries of behaviors toward marginalized people, specifically people of color. Both Collins and Weems appear to agree in Collins precise way that "women of the African diaspora can be defined or categorized in two ways: as individuals who have unique lived experiences, and as a subgroup within a marginalized population."[12] Its affects are prominent in every facet of

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10. Karen Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 1-215.

11. Susan Torres-Harding and Tasha Turner, "Assessing Racial Microagression Distress in a Diverse Sample," *Evaluation and the Health Professions 38*, no. 4 (2015): 464-490; Daniel Solorzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso, "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microagressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students," *Journal of Negro Education 69*, no. ½ (2000): 60.

12. Rogers, "A Seat at the Table," 87-108.

Black people's lives. However, this discussion relates specifically to Black women in midlife obtaining the doctorate degree.

To have an informative discussion relative to those issues and the history of Black women in higher education the phenomenon must be demonstrated by deconstructing the social historical conditions and context. In Hudson-Weems' work she says with conviction, Black women are the subjects not the objects. There is a need to "situate and define the complex realities through the windows of historical truths and cultural circumstances of the woman of African descent."[13]

The interests in women as subjects became more pronounced in the 20th and 21st centuries. Questions about Black women and education in the literature seems to focus on how Black women make meaning of their education and their persistence and motivations. Significant dialog related particularly to them in the understanding and support for the impact of obstacles, barriers, and inequities that impact successful completion of the doctorate degree appears to be exigent from the literature. This is in contrast to the volume of research related to White women and degree attainment.

Historically, Black women experienced barriers to higher education in the United States dating back to post reconstruction. Support for their education from Black men came at a price; 1862 marked a monumental moment in Black women's higher education history. Mary Jane Patterson became the first Black woman in the United States to earn the BA degree from Oberlin College. Between 1861 and 1870 the American Missionary

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13. Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves,* 14-18.

Society helped to establish seven Black colleges and thirteen teaching schools.[14] In 1865 at the end of the Civil War and President Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation to abolish slavery, there were roughly four million freed slaves of which the majority could not read or write. It was then that abolitionists, religious sects, and other philanthropic organizations began to help facilitate educational access to Blacks.[15] The doors to higher education opened a few inches even though for the majority of Black women it was still beyond their reach. However, women of African descent had exceptional determination. These women scholars came from diverse backgrounds with the collective enlightenment and upliftment of their people as their mantra. Those women also faced the prevailing thought of the times that women who were educated primary function was their responsibility to home. This overshadowed an economic need and ability to work outside of the home. Black women became a necessary commodity for the progress of the Black race. For Black women the emergence of the mantra of race upliftment in the 1830s served as a springboard to a form of Black liberation.[16]

Historians who celebrate the progress of Black women from Africa to the Americas all define the progression as perseverance and a collective effort. However, there is no clear definition of who supported these women as their personal communal cognitive clusters. It is a supposition that as these stories were written about Black

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14. Jennifer Peltak, *The History of African American Colleges and Universities* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003), 109-113.

15. Luciana Janee Starks, "Pathways to the Doctorate Degree: A Phenomenological Study of African American Women in Doctorate Degree Programs," (EdD diss., Pepperdine University, 2010), accessed March 20, 2018, http://www.ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

16. Elizabeth L. Ihle, ed., *Black Women in Higher Education: An Anthology of Essays, Studies, and Documents* (New York. Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 33.

women, the mention of anyone who possibly was a friend in the struggle at the same time could only be inferred as a colleague but not necessarily part of their communal cognitive cluster. Nevertheless, the readings name women in the same discussion giving the assumption of membership or the founding of an organization but not friendship. Again, it is an assumption that if you are working on and in the same organization that there is some familiarity without knowing what level of friendship is occurring at that time.

Historian Stephanie Y. Evans writes in her book, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower*, a thorough historical analysis of Black women in higher education. She approaches the subject matter with specificity of text to give one a most admirable historical journey of Black women's achievements in higher education from 1850-1954. One of the key historical figures is Anna Julia Cooper, the fourth Black woman to receive a PhD. Evans points out the criticality of understanding the dynamics of fulfilling educational goals, the responsibility of the upliftment of Blacks as a people and the struggle to have personal fulfilling lives thorough often tumultuous times. While Evans' work is comprehensive and instructive in viewing the historic accomplishments of Black women in higher education and the location of those achievements, she does not delve into the complexities of personal friendships as these women forge forward.[17] While looking at primary sources about Black women in higher education[18] this is not unusual

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17. Stephanie Y. Evans, Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954 (Gainsville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008), 120-138.

18. Kim Mari Vaz, ed., *Black Women in America* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.,1995), 1-14; Barbara V. Bush, Crystal Renee Chambers, and Mary Beth Walpole, ed., *From Diplomas to Doctorate: The Success of Black Women in Higher Education and It's Implications for Equal Educational Opportunities for All* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC., 2009), 111-130.

and appears to be assumptive that they had to have close relationships in order to accomplish their goals.

Women Writing Africa: West Africa and the Sahel was found to have the necessary adherence to the Afrocentric model of research and historiography that is important to discussions of Black women's influence and communal participation in West African history and society. The introduction explores African women by demonstrating the researchers' positionality. "Opening the doors to new stories, participating in new thinking about African women in the current postcolonial moment, means filling in gaps in the epistemologies and histories on the continent as well as in the European discourses of Africa's "invention."[19] The intent of that statement agrees with the conceptual framework of this dissertation. This comprehensive reader is a historical account that examines pertinent aspects of African women's relationship within colonialism to contemporary times. It is significant that the writers are calling this aspect a "revised historiography" of African women. It can be seen within this book how the relationship to the concepts of communal cognitive clusters and will was essential to the lifestyle of the subjects. An essential point is the element of dependence on the support and confidence of community as opposed to individualism. It is clearly evidenced in "*Women writing Africa*" just as the Black women in 19th century United States struggled with patriarchal power struggles so did the women of Africa. Some remained voiceless while others defied the systematic deafening of their voices by using song, dance to mark major moments both political and familial. Those songs carried Black women's voices

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19. Esi Sutherland Addy, and Aminata Diaw, ed., *Women Writing Africa: West Africa and the Sahel* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2009), 8. 13, 59, 67.

into the 18th century slave songs of pending communal freedom. These examples form the structure of communal cognitive clusters as used in this dissertation defined as a community of people moving in the same direction for a common outcome whether intrusive or obtrusive.

Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu in her book, *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture,* validated the shared concept of communal cognitive clusters and its supernatural migration to the aesthetics of Black women in America. Nzegwu uses historical remembrances to present a different lens for discussion to analyze social aspects via oral and written documents of African Women in Nigeria from the Igbo ethnic group. She discusses the family structure from past to present. While this chapter of her book is focused on the differences in Eurocentric feminism and the African feminist concepts particularly dealing with the interpretations of the African woman's role defense against feminist notions of equality, it is a way to demonstrate the essence of Molefe Asante's term communal cognitive clusters. The historical component describes the location, community relations and family law. One of the reenactments is about Omu Nwagboka, a ruling leader of her community. She is in the process of making a significant ruling that will affect all within her community relative to a burial process. There are references to her being surrounded and advised by women of various socioeconomic status. The decisions she made were not as an individual but as a collective. She utilized her communal cognitive cluster. Omu is surrounded in this shared decision making by women counselors known as "Otu Ogene." Young girls are also added to the community partnership. They are included in the decision-making

process. This intergenerational consult is significant. Making decisions on burial rites for the Asantes is extremely important. In this case it was the decision about burial rites of Omu Nwagboka's husband.[20] This example clearly illuminates Molefe Asante's definition of communal cognitive clusters as those who gather together on one accord moving toward a common goal. This example lends itself to the essence of the term. Its reference is being placed within the location of those who support Black women and their decision-making process.

The literature that has been extracted thus far gives credence to the tenacity and persistence of Black women in Africa and in the Americas to work communally. This dissertation approaches the phenomenon of communal cognitive clusters from the personal perspective. There has been no plausible discussion in any of the literature that has been reviewed thus far relative to Black women currently in higher education pursuing the doctorate while in midlife other than Anna Julia Cooper, the muse for this study.

Afrocentric Communal Cognitive Clusters

Though the foci are on the Afrocentric framework of Communal Cognitive Clusters, it is my contention that there were conceptual forms of support within the Afrocentric culture that dates back to the mythoforms connected to Kemetic mythology moving forward into the histrionics of African culture. Culture that was passed on to Blacks enslaved in America.

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20. Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu, *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), 103-156.

Black Women and Communal Cognitive Clusters

Black women were invisible in history, research, and education until around the 19th century. Referenced in the histrionics presented in the literature there is a necessity for introspection of Black women of the 1900s succession to an educational level that was infused with family and community support. This was their communal cognitive cluster. The literature pertaining to communal cognitive clusters strongly suggests the importance of kinship, family, and extended family as a collective. This distinct factor is directly associated with decision making and support. This phenomenon has been the focus of a number of authors particularly in the 1980s. They recognized these relationships were structurally imperative to the family dynamics.[21] In the context of Afrocentric research it will be informative to document the context and structure of the Black woman's positionality of community in Africa before discussing Black women in America. A growing body of literature attests to substantial efforts to recognize the need to discuss the realities of what has influenced Black women in historical Africa. This review of literature attests to the diversity in research data and contexts. Multi-levels of meaning can be relocated through valuing the concrete experiences of Black women's lives. Discussing Black women in Africa will help document the context and structure of the Black woman's positionality of community before discussing Black women in America.

The literature pertaining to communal cognitive clusters strongly suggests the importance of kinship, family, and extended family as a collective. This distinct factor is

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21. Harriet Pipes McAdoo, ed., *Black Families*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 154.

directly associated with decision making and support. This phenomenon has been the focus of a number of authors particularly in the 1980s. They recognized these relationships were structurally imperative to family dynamics.[22]

While theoretical literature is important, dissertations represent a substantial body of research that has yielded some relevant insight. Antoinette Michelle Rogers study focused on Black women who earned doctorates in education. Her concern was what factors were influential in their success. Her research found 15 factors that helped foster success. Social support was a major factor. Several dissertations were found that incorporated some form of social support theme within the subject matter of Black women who were on the path to the doctorate. Luciana Janee Starks writes about pathways to the doctoral degree for Black women in which she discusses the academic experiences of Black women pursuing their doctorate degree. Her study approaches the subject matter of support from an institutional point of view. Starks' results show persistence and self-determination as major factors for success. Her recommendations suggest critical support is needed from the academic side of the doctoral student experience in order to achieve ultimate success.[23] The following are several studies that address Black women in midlife. They focus on the rationales that look at the relationships between social, class, inferences of aging and the role of health and support.

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22. McAdoo, *Black Families,* 19-27.

23. Luciana Janee Starks, "Pathways to the Doctorate Degree: A Phenomenological Study of African American Women in Doctorate Degree Programs," (PhD diss., Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA, 2010), accessed February 20, 2019, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

Although they do not call the support systems communal cognitive clusters, they assess the study process and findings in a decidedly Afrocentric contextual framework.

Yvonne Combs-Jones' study shows the effect of aging patterns for 26 Black women between the ages of thirty-six and seventy-one; 42 percent held master's degrees and higher. It is not a comparative study of Black women versus White women but makes a point to address the disparities. Combs similarity to my dissertation is in the context of the social construct of family through collective memory and the effects of family and extended family dynamics as support systems. Her theoretical models are similar. She attests to the shared values, attitudes, and belief systems that form the family axiology and how that signals reasons for communal support.[24] She concludes that her study was to create awareness, new vigilance, and new knowledge on theories of African-American women in midlife. Her efforts through the narratives of the study participants were to eliminate discussions that are usually held regarding all women from a biomedical model using menopause as the primary variable.[25]

Sislena G. Grocer takes an Afrocentric perspective in reevaluating a Women's Life Path Study originally conducted in 1996 by Tangri, Thomas, Mednick, and Stewart. The demographics of her study was Midlife Black women, 42-67. She was evaluating roles and life satisfaction for this group of women. Grocer's study was done to update and prove the validity of the former study. She added value to the former study by the

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24. Yvonne Combs-Jones, "African-American Women at Midlife: The Social Construction of Health and Aging," (PhD. Diss., University of Florida. 2004), accessed August 25, 2018, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

25. Ibid.

addition of college educated mid-life Black women. She also used a construct that was a "within" design using Black women exclusively who were also graduates of Howard University. The study expands the number of original roles given to Black women from three to four. She also alludes to the importance of communal support given within the roles that assist in the accomplishments of those roles.[26] As in all the studies listed they advise of the criticality and the necessity that it is incumbent on social scientists to do more empirical studies that look at well-being for Black women in midlife.

In two final studies the focus was solely on Black women doctoral students related to support in completing the doctorate. Vanetta Bailey Iddrisu focused on ten Black women professionals who had completed their doctorate degrees between the ages of thirty-five and sixty. These students were considered non-traditional students, based on age and minority status. This dissertation mirrored the demographic for my study. The theoretical framework was based on Tinto's theories on persistence and Ellis' 1997 study on the Three Stages for Graduate Student Development. The writer also used a Black Feminist perspective which included writings from Collins and hooks to support her work. Iddrisu's findings suggested that the study participant's assistance was through communal support that included families, friends, coworkers, sorority and church members, children, and God. This communal cognitive support system helped them through the process and admittedly enabled them to be successful. The three primary themes extracted from their narratives related to persistence and included support systems

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26. Sislena G. Grocer, "Life Satisfaction and Well-Being for College Educated, Midlife, African American Women," (PhD diss., Howard University, 2001), accessed December 15, 2017, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

that enabled these women to complete the doctorate while maneuvering through the system of graduate study. It was interesting to note that even though the focus of this dissertation was on the educational persistence for Black women the case was presented specifically with recommendations for better strategic planning for non-traditional students. It also identified that these women actually formed a communal cognitive cluster of support. The writer called it a "sisterhood" that was estimated to last because of their collective success.[27]

The Patterson phenomenological study on eight Black women stands out because it demystifies the misinterpretations mainstream research has written related to the Black woman's experience going through the doctorate. She examines relationships during the doctoral process, particularly those who are returning to graduate school after a substantial time away from higher education. Even though her study's focus is on personal and intimate relationships, she is clear on her position related to individual success and achievements as relates it to "Black women develop survival skills in accordance to gendered patterns of communal behavior that may be traced to their African cultural heritages."[28] Patterson's discussions on communal and cultural foundations are in concert with the categorical discussions this researcher codifies as an African culturally centered foundation. She places her discussion on collective identity

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27. Vannetta Baily Iddrisu, "Women of African Descent: Persistence in Completing Doctorates," (PhD diss., Florida International University, Miami, FL), accessed February 20, 2019, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

28. Dana Murray Patterson, "Divorcing the Doctor: Black Women Doctoral Students and Their Intimate Relationships During the Doctoral Process," (PhD diss., Washington State University, Pullman, WA), accessed September 15, 2018, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

as a resistance to several issues including sexual oppression. These comments lead into Patterson's usage of the feminist and Africana womanist epistemologies as differing views on Black womanhood. She discusses properties that are very similar to my thesis in that she seeks to find an in-depth understanding of friendships and finds that friendships are a valuable part of academic success.[29]

Denson in her dissertation addressed social support related to the re-entry of non-traditional Black women who return to higher education. Her focus is on retention. She analyzes factors and barriers for those who re-enter education at the Bachelor degree level and the need for social support, both formal and informal, to undergird successful completion of that degree.[30] The studies listed have all supported and touched on some aspect of the dissertation being submitted. All inquiries support the need to further investigate empirically the lives, roles, health, and well-being of Black women in midlife as the subjects of the research and not the objects. None of the dissertations specified a particular age range of the Black women being studied. Black women scholars writing about Black women as the subject matter will open the academy to new knowledge from an Afrocentric perspective.

Walter R. Allen's empirical studies on Black students in graduate and professional schools noted that there was a lack of research in the area of communalism. Allen's study done 25 years ago related to Black students in higher education but there

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29. Patterson, "Divorcing the Doctor," accessed September 15, 2018.

30. Janet L. Denson, "Experiences of Reentry and Nontraditional Black Women and Their Support Networks: A Journey in Pursuit of a College Degree," (PhD diss., Capella University, Minneapolis, MN, 2009), accessed February 20, 2019, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

was no major discussion related to the type of support Black students, particularly women received from their families or extended families. The assumption was that Black women in graduate school were more impacted by non-traditional support. But the type of non-traditional support was not defined. There was a missing social dimension to the research.[31] This example is one of the indicators that there was a paucity in the research at that time. There is mention of several studies done from 1969 to 1984 on the production of Black success, each giving causal factors for success. Allen's findings do not discuss outside support systems such as spouses, parents, extended families although there were discussions within those studies that perhaps their personal background had something to do with their success. Finding research data that spends more than a few sentences on the communal cognitive support expression is difficult. Most define support as predominately family with an emphasis on spousal support. However, scholars that discuss the educational success of Black people that obtained higher education goals in the 18th - 19th century always give credit to family support and the church albeit that affirmation only exists in a sentence or two.

Current Literature Relevant to Research Questions

RQ1: How do Black women in mid-life adopt the decision to re-enter higher education?

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31. Walter R. Allen, ed., *College in Black and White: African American Students in Predominately White and Historically Black Public Universities* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 5.

Re-entering Higher Education in Midlife

Is the earning of one degree sufficient? Despite the challenges Black women face in the academy, some not only seek additional education beyond the bachelor's degree but pursue doctoral study. Hence, the motivation, challenges and benefits of Black women pursuing doctoral degrees are also reviewed. Pursuit of graduate studies at an atypical age likely involves actualizing a desired possible self. Researchers King and Hicks assert that one's ability to construct a new future may represent the degree to which an individual has fully recognized regrets and disappointment. Once they determine their possible selves, they are able to move forward in attaining what they desire for the future. The results of this study found that with the resiliency of participants in the study showed that when the actualization took place of achieving the doctoral degree it appears to contribute to life satisfaction and facilitate resolution of midlife regret.[32]

Seeking the doctorate in midlife is critiqued as women attempting to continually construct and reconstruct their lives is defined as "midcourse correction." This correction is an attempt to find meaning in all the primary events over the course of their lives. Within these self-narratives women tend to consider the past and present as they anticipate their future.[33] In a study that examined motivations and reactions to obtaining a doctorate, it was found that forty-four percent of the women surveyed responded that

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32. Catherine E. Hiltz-Hymes, Susan E. Spicer, Elizabeth A. Hardy, Manuela Waddell, and Sherry L. Hatcher, "Midcourse Corrections and Life Satisfaction in a Sample of Mid-Career Doctoral Students," *The Qualitative Report 20* no 10 (October 2015): 1709-1722.

33. Ibid.

seeking the doctorate was a career change of plans and fifty-six percent found considerable life satisfaction from that change of plan. The authors called this "midcourse correction," the act of looking back over one's life and appraising their experiences and achievements while considering their future. When women take an assessment or mid-life review of their lives it is an opportunity for midcourse corrections to happen.[34] It is a continual assessment of where one is in the present and where one wants to be in the future. Other scholars ascertain that women are living longer than expected, so this preoccupation with futuristic planning is introspective and an ode to longevity. It has been noted in the U.S. Census data in 2008 women were living on average to the age of seventy-seven.

Barriers and Challenges

Midlife women can expect to encounter multiple barriers to their progress in obtaining the desired degree. These barriers are not new. Some of the barriers are ageism, race, gender and support systems. Given all the barriers that midlife women face, they have continued to re- enter in greater numbers than older men.[35]

Despite the challenges Black women face in the academy, some not only seek additional education beyond the bachelor's degree but pursue doctoral study. Attrition research has found that many women leave their pursuit of the doctorate for personal reasons like marriage and children. While there is an increase in women pursuing and

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34. Catherine E. Hiltz-Hymes., Susan Spicer, Elizabeth A. Hardy, Manuela Waddell, and Sherry L. Hatcher, "Midcourse Corrections and Life Satisfaction in a Sample of Mid-Career Doctoral Students," *The Qualitative Report 20*, no. 10 (2015): 1711.

35. Colvin, "Where is Merlin when I need Him?" 19-32.

obtaining doctorates the literature states that the retention rates for Black women is lower in comparison to their male colleagues. Further in examining time to degree completion in a doctoral program, family issues like childcare and marriage prevent women from finishing early. Other challenges include a lack of mentoring and socialization and little or no access to research opportunities. Not surprising Black women report lower levels of satisfaction with and commitment to their doctoral programs than their male and White counterparts. Collins asserts that women of the African Diaspora can be defined or categorized in two ways: as individuals who have unique lived experiences and as a subgroup within a marginalized population. Non-Black individuals tend to make damaging stereotypical assumptions about us. This informs behaviors and judgments which then informs the lived experiences of Black women. The figures on Black women pursuing the doctorate suggest continuous growth. Family matters appear to extend their time to degree.[36]

Researchers have categorical divided barriers into situational/structural and dispositional. Situational barriers are specific to responsibilities of home life, finances and support. They suggest that women in midlife have issues with transportation and the cost of education so they tend to opt for distance learning or some type of accelerated program that gives them less time away from their families. The dispositional barriers have to do with the attitudes they encounter in the classroom because of their age. This often results in the lack of asking for assistance because their belief is that because they

36. Rogers, "A Seat at the Table," 103.

are older, they have more experience than the younger students. They withhold asking questions because there is oftentimes a feeling of being talked down to by the professor who is younger than the mature student.[37]

Xi Lin chose several studies to examine related to adult learners and found the concept of family and social support had differing opinions based on data collected from their study participants. She suggests in her review of the McGivney studies on non-traditional female students that family commitments were a major reason for female adult learners to become non-completers of their education. The lack of support that was identified created data to state that this also impeded their educational process. Family barriers usually lead to incomplete education.

However, in one of her other reviews from Plageman and Sabina who examined the relationship between family and the adult student, the data showed that the mothers of the adult students played the most significant role in their attention to class attendance and persistence to graduation.[38] It is to be noted that these studies did not identify the ages of these non-traditional students. This was a review of literature of adult women enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States. It was designed to bring attention to the barriers and challenges of non-traditional women returning to higher education. The significance of that study to this study will be determined by the data analysis in Chapter IV.

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37. Colvin, "Where is Merlin when I need Him," 19-32.

38. Lin, "Barriers and Challenges of Female Adult Students Enrolled in Higher Education," 119-126.

Motivation for Learning Later

In this midlife transition there is a basic need to understand how to interpret their experiences so that it brings out new dynamics of the roles they are playing as a midlifer and the realization that the roles Merlon states is where ageist attitudes can be dispelled and new friendships of support can emerge. It is being in a space of self-direction, and mutual respect.[39] This is in the ideal world of doctoral studies. However, there are obstacles in this decision to return to school. Some of the obstacles are that the experience and expertise of the older student is ignored. Whether positive or negative there is a feeling of being more skilled then classmates so they can be the experts and more likely to assume leadership roles. There is also the space for self-direction, mutual respect and building self-esteem that could have possibly diminished while working or in the home where there is possible male dominance. Midlife becomes a comfort level in expressing their views in a safe space of intellectual freedom. These changes can bring about positive opportunities to pursue doctoral studies at this stage of their lives. There is a renewed feeling of the ability to make sense out of previous experiences of life and the stamina to go forward into new directions within this phase of life. Some women feel that time is of the essence and their dreams need to be manifested. This is also a time for Black women to occupy educational spaces that interrupt negative images of aging, particularly at midlife. [40] It is also a time for feeling more active and youthful.

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39. Colvin, "Where is Merlin when I need Him," 19-32.

40. Sheila R. Jones, "Creating Our Own Stories and Trusting Our Own Voices: Midlife, Black, Female Doctoral Students Navigating the Crossroads of Age, Race and Gender," (PhD diss., Texas State University, San Marcos, TX, 2017), 7-11.

Engaging with younger students place the non-traditional in a space of respect for their experience and knowledge.

RQ2: How do the women in this purposeful study interpret their support networks using the terms and definition of Communal Cognitive Clusters?

The literature on the Afrocentric terminology of communal cognitive clusters appears to be nonexistent. Various keywords were used to search for the terms. However, references to support was recognized among the literature related to the aggregate of all women and not specifically Black women in doctorate programs. The following studies and comments are based on those references. The number of non-traditional women enrolled in higher education programs has more than tripled since 1970. It remains to be seen if the women in this study had personal supportive communal cognitive clusters. However, the literature reviewed supports the need for this type of support while going through the doctorate whether at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) or Historic White Institution (HWI). The opportunities to bond with women who are like minded and in need of support from each other is necessitated for many reasons. The doctoral journey needs the solidarity of a positive support group. It creates an environment of space to share experiences and shared personal counselling in a space that renders itself to feelings of invisibility. These Communal Cognitive Clusters may be all the encouragement Black women doctoral students receive from outside the institution. Rogers states regarding community/collectivism that 'this illustrates the dynamic power of the relationships amongst Black "women that rebuff the

myth that we do not build or sustain community or work collaboratively."[41] Her encouragement for more research in this area is significant to the reasons for this study. Frameworks such as Asante's and Hudson's Africana Womanist insistence on Communal Cognitive Clusters along with Black Feminist thought on collectivity and community should be continuously woven into the fabric of those inquiries regarding the positive support these clusters give to the potential culture, marginalization, and attempts at silencing or censoring that can occur with these women while striving to be their best self in the academy.

Juhanna Rogers discusses the dynamic power of relationships amongst Black women that rebuff the myth that we do not build or sustain community or work collaboratively. She suggests that more work is needed in this area. Frameworks such as the Communal Cognitive Clusters, Africana womanist and Black Feminist thought are necessary considerations when looking at inquiries regarding Black women in midlife pursuing the Doctorate degree. It helps to understand the impact of culture, marginalization, and silencing while striving to be their best self.

Another study by Xi Lin, supports the need for support from family members and extended family for women in midlife non-traditional doctoral students. She contends juthat family support plays a significant role in non-traditionalist academic experiences. She suggests that no or limited support leads to reasons for not completing in this population. It is an impediment to progress. She cites studies that found the mothers of these non-traditional students were the most supportive. "Some women consider

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41. Rogers, "A Seat at the Table," accessed January 18, 2007, https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.

pursuing higher education would benefit themselves and their entire family." She also contends that with family and social support it provides a secure attachment to their studies and benefits to the family.[42]

Ross discusses in her study older African-American women nontraditional students the fact that they faced many barriers without the structural support they needed from family. They opined that they had limited resources to pay for education, combined with issues of lower self-esteem and social expectations. Her dissertation provides an alternative thought about support because the majority of her participants had similar demographics and all lacked family support.

Support lends itself to positive outcomes for the non-traditional midlife Black woman. It gives them the opportunity to learn, grow, and bond when they are with women like themselves. It builds their own personal communal cognitive cluster of support that fosters comradery and solidarity by being able to share their experiences from their own narrative.[43] It can in affect become a personal lifelong bond of connectedness. Black women are more likely to persist in this type environment.

In a study done by Crystal Garner Henderson looking at Black women doctoral students in a predominately White institution she mentions their only source of connectivity with others for support was reliability on themselves as a sisterhood to maneuver the intersectionality's of racism and gender along with macroaggressions

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42. Lin, Xi. "Barriers and Challenges of Female Adult Students Enrolled in Higher Education," 119-126.

43. Rogers, "A Seat at the Table," accessed January 18, 2007, https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.

associated with stereotypical expectations and bias directed at them along with a lack of institutional support. This study helped to understand how culture, marginalization, and attempts at silencing these doctoral candidates created a necessary self-imposed communal cognitive cluster to survive the process.[44]

There are several dissertations on the support Black women need when in a doctoral program, but none use the term communal cognitive cluster to distinguish the support group. It will be of interest to see if the study participants within this study are familiar and/or use the term.

RQ3: How is time to graduation affected by active communal cognitive cluster support?

The number of doctorates awarded to women has increased and so has the length of time to earn a doctorate particularly in education. In the year 2000 the average number of years to complete from the baccalaureate to the doctorate in education was 19.4 years. There are those that say the time to graduation should not be concerning. Others point to attrition rates which are roughly about 50 percent in many doctoral programs.[45] Why do women in general leave before completion? Capability is not the question but increased

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44. Crystal Garner Henderson, "When Stereotypes Speak Louder than our Words: Black Female Doctoral Students and their Experience with Race, Invisibility, and Self-Censorship at a Predominantly White Institution," (PhD diss., University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, 2019), accessed January 22, 2019, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

45. Anna Sverdlik, Nathan C. Hall, Lynn McAlpine, and Kyle Hubbard, "The PhD Experience: A Review of the Factors Influencing Doctoral Students' Completion Achievement, and Well Being," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 13* (2018): 361-388.

time to graduation makes pursuing this degree not an attractive option. The longer they are in progress the shorter time to contribute in a professional role.[46]

Other contributors to time to graduation rates is the absence of available funds to complete the degree, putting the needs of family first, and possible health issues of the student or aging parents that take precedence. This, in turn, causes stress on the graduate student.

Mayer conducted a study on doctoral student finishing rates. The purpose of the study was to identify factors affecting women's progress toward doctoral degree and to explore the extent to which identified factors remained consistent across those who finished quickly and those who took considerably longer. Mayer continues to state that there are categories of finish rates. In her study of 160 alumnus of a particular university, early finishers finished in under 4.25 years. Average finishers 4.5-6.5 years. Late finishers 6.75 years or more. Early finishers reported the factors that facilitated their degree progress was help or support from family and being focused on strong goals to finish early. Sometimes financial constraints and job opportunities stimulated the early finisher.

Late finishers reported institutional issues, childcare, caring for elderly members of the family, relocation with their spouses and some reported divorce as the reason. The researcher found that this group were less clear about their goals and felt no urgency to complete the program. In fact, some appeared to make being a doctoral student a lifelong

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46. Michelle A. Maher, Martin E. Ford, and Candace M. Thompson, "Degree Progress of Women Doctoral Students: Factors that Constrain, Facilitate, and Differentiate," *Review of Higher Education* 27, no. 3 (spring 2004): 385-408.

venture. The data showed that 25 percent of the group were late finishers vs. 4 percent were early finishers. This study will be significant to the data on the Black women being studied and here their attrition rates fall within this study's perimeters and the reasons why it occurred.

Janet Denson in her dissertation addressed social support related to the re-entry of nontraditional Black women who return to higher education focuses on retention. She analyzes factors and barriers for those who re-enter education at the bachelor's degree level and the need for social support, both formal and informal, to undergird successful completion of that degree.[47] None of the dissertations specified a particular age range of the Black women being studied.

Conclusion

This chapter has engaged in the understanding that outlined the objectives of the literature review for this dissertation. The review covered the Afrocentric Paradigm Communal Cognitive Clusters and will, the historical context of Black women in higher education, Black women in midlife while responding to the research questions posed in this dissertation. Chapter III outlines the methods used to collect and analyze the data to support the research questions provided in Chapter I.

47. Denson, "Experiences of Reentry and Nontraditional Black Women and Their Support Networks," accessed February 9, 2019, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

> Afrocentric research methodology will push the inquiry into a higher realm where the methodology and the process of knowledge construction cease to take precedence over the wellbeing of the people being researched. A principle advantage of an Afrocentric approach is that it compels the researcher to challenge the use of the traditional Eurocentric research criteria of objectivity, reliability, and validity in the inquiry process.
>
> --Ruth Reviere, *Afrocentric Research Methodology*

The purpose of this research was to explore the subjective experience of Black women who start and complete the degree of doctorate in Humanities at Clark Atlanta University while in midlife. The study addresses the impact of communal cognitive cluster cohorts on successful completion of the degree. The analysis focuses on Molefi Asante's concept of "communal cognitive will" in determining success within this community of Black women. The goal is to qualitatively compare the value of these two epistemologies as non-hegemonic world views through qualitative methods and design.

Afrocentric scholars concur that Blacks should be the subject of research being done on that community and not the object of the inquiries. Afrocentric research methodology is "an aesthetic of African people that must be centered on our

experience.[1] This study may be useful to Black women as motivational information and guidance. It will inform, guide, and possibly motivate women in midlife who are seeking to fill the intellectual void, mitigate economic disparities, and fulfill self-actualizing goals. New knowledge will add to the illumination of underrepresented documentation in this disparaged data set.

The initial plan for the research allowed the process to be fluid and provided a space for natural social reality to emerge. It was expected that there would be changes or shifts that might occur during the analysis of the data.

Site for Research

Clark Atlanta University (CAU) was the site of interest for this study because of its rich history of scholastic achievements, honors, and historical faculty. As of May 2015, Clark Atlanta University conferred eighty-four Doctorate of Arts and Humanities degrees since 1987, the year of the consolidation of Clark College and Atlanta University creating Clark Atlanta University.[2] The Doctor of Arts in Humanity (DAH) degree was established at Atlanta University in the 1980s graduating its first (DAH) in 1984. Six more would follow before the consolidation of Atlanta University and Clark College in 1986. Upon that consolidation in 1986, the doctorate was continued as part of the newly established doctoral programs at Clark Atlanta University. The DAH degree was replaced with a PhD degree in Humanities in 2014.

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1. Ama Mazama, *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2002), 34.

2. CAU Commencement Programs, 1987-2015, Alumnae data base.

Research Design

Exploratory research looks for answers and new knowledge regarding a new topic with limited extant research. This research design examines commonalities and differences in the doctoral journey of five study participants who were purposefully selected because of the following criteria: Must be a Black woman, in midlife when started, and completed the doctorate. It requires examining variables, commonalities and differences in the lives of five Black women on their journey to the doctorate.

This study used an Afrocentric qualitative phenomenological research design.[3] In Afrocentric research Africa is the first or the start of the critical thinking process that helps to define the focus and outcomes of the research.

Molefi Asante's concept of social support as "communal cognitive will" provides an opportunity to scholarly determine, clarify, and quantify the necessity for an Afrocentric research design. This design is intuitive and instructive. The research design is expected to evolve as data is collected. These are primary principles in Afrocentric research methodology. This methodology also supports an Africana Womanism and Black Feminism analysis of the Black woman's specific experience. This study does not attempt to be a general statement that all Black women in midlife express themselves in the same manner.

An examination of the phenomenon of the power of Communal Cognitive Clusters was discussed through the one-on-one interviews (see Appendix A). The premise and intent were to demonstrate how these Black women's informal support

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3. Queeneth Mkabela, "Using Afrocentric Method in Researching Indigenous African Culture," *The Qualitative Report 10*, no.1 (2005): 178-189.

systems and experiences may or may not differ or be exclusive from subject to subject. The study specifically looked at their communal cognitive clusters and how they impacted success. This researcher placed the Afrocentric world view in its proper perspective showing that it stands beside all other perspectives as a viable and important worldview rather than relying on the dominating perspective.[4]

The intent of this hybrid design was to create a specific epistemology related to these Black women. The design strategy was intended to be an acknowledgment that in the basic Afrocentric belief systems or world view, the researcher is responsible for reporting any differences or similarities that may be revealed. The Afrocentric methodology excavated and brought to the surface the historical ethos in which Black women operate to succeed in higher education specifically in midlife.

Methods and Data Analytical Strategies

The protocol for this study started with the submission of the research plan to Clark Atlanta University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. The researcher explained all instruments and data collection processes to secure that approval. That included the selection criterion: (1) Must be a Black woman, (2) Must have a Doctor of Arts in Humanities degree from Clark Atlanta University, and (3) Must have started and completed her doctorate while in midlife which has been defined as the ages of 45-61. The plan to identify how the subjects would be recruited was also stated. The questions that were to be asked of the participants was included in the IRB submission. The risk factors to the study participants was determined to be minimal. When the IRB

4. Mkabela, "Using Afrocentric Method in Researching Indigenous African Culture,"178-189.

approval was obtained, a number was assigned with an expiration date for the interview process. Once the participants were found and agreed to participate a Letter of Informed Consent was sent. The letter addressed confidentiality, complete anonymity, and safety. They signed and returned to the researcher. The researcher made phone contact to arrange for an interview in a setting of their choice. The subjects were advised that the interviews would be one-on-one and recorded. They were also advised that once the interview tape was transcribed, they would have an opportunity to approve the transcription. An agreement was made between the subject and the researcher that the transcription was accurate.

The data were collected and analyzed in the protocol of the Afrocentric paradigm. "A collection of data…for an Afrocentric project will consider cognitive and material systems, direct and indirect data-gathering measures, myths, tape or video-recorded conversations, and unobtrusive acquisition processes based on the African culture."[5] This researcher's perspective in examining and analyzing data looked for nuances in symbolic imagery, as well as the similarities and differences between the study participants. It was the different voices and views of reality that became significant in this study. Significant bonds and relationships were assessed through conversation, observation, and discussions from a tactile exercise. All data collected were protected and held in a locked secure location. It will be kept for five years following the completion of the study. At that time the data will be destroyed.

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5. Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1990), 5-7.

There were multiple sources used in the collection of data. Serie McDougal III discusses the importance of the research design component which determines the "who and what" in research.[6] He refers to them as the units of analysis. The individual units of analysis for this study were part of a selected sampling strategy. Since CAU was the site of exploration, a situational analysis was done to find the best mechanism to find the study participants. The Robert Woodruff Library archives was determined as the site to find information for the data set. A filtering process was used to look at preliminary aggregate data to find all recipients of the Doctor of Arts and Humanities (DAH) degree at Clark Atlanta University.

> **Filter One**: All commencement programs were pulled from the Robert Woodruff archival collection at CAU from 1984, one year prior to the conversion of Atlanta University and Clark College to 2017.
>
> **Filter Two**: The number of graduates who received their doctorate in humanities was extracted from the aggregate number of all doctoral graduates. Sixty-one graduates were in that preliminary data set.
>
> **Filter Three**: the number of women graduates was determined. This determined the second preliminary data set for study participants. Those dissertations were pulled, and specific acknowledgement data was annotated. This provided the communal cognitive cluster data set for all persons, objects and things mentioned in gratitude and support for the obtainment of the degree.

The names of all the women who graduated with their Doctorate in Arts and Humanities were noted and the CAU Alumna Directory *25 Extraordinary Years, One Extraordinary Place* was used to search and extrapolate telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of those initial women identified. This became the initial form of introductory contact. It is from that data that the potential study participants were identified and

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6. Serie McDougal III, *Research Methods in Africana Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 94-105.

solicited to participate. Only one potential study participant was gleaned from this process. That participant happened to be a part of the researcher's department. Using a deductive method from that information the researcher found four more potential subjects within her department of Africana Women's Studies, African American Studies and History.

Once the potential participants responded affirmatively, a letter was mailed which was the agreement to participate in the research. When the signed document was returned the researcher made contact to arrange for an established setting of the participants choice where the interviews would be conducted. Some potential convenient locations included the Robert Woodruff Library or other library locations throughout the city of Atlanta; somewhere on the CAU campus, or in the homes of the respondents. The participants were also advised that the interviews would be taped one-on-one interviews. The semi-structured interviews described the lived experiences of the study participants. The study participants also agreed to do a tactile exercise called the Convoy Model.

For a deeper exploration and analysis of the lived experience phenomena, an adaptation of a Eurocentric visual tactile Convoy Model based on Antonucci and Akiyama's *Convoy Model of Social Relations* was given to the study participants during the interview segment (see Appendix B, Figure B1). The adaption to their model were the questions asked of the study participants that differed from the Antonucci model whose questions were specifically related to health care supports for the elderly. Antonucci used the results from 53 questionnaires given to adult young women, their mothers, and their grandmothers to assess support network structures for the elderly as it

related to size, amount of support, and nomination of close family members as the primary method of support.[7] This model was cited in 1990 as the progenitor of seminal studies on personal supportive relationships over the lifespan of men and women, particularly as it relates to health and aging. Antonucci's studies using this model have always had limited study participation from people of color, particularly Blacks.[8] My contextual Afrocentric adaptation of the convoy model used questions specifically to demonstrate preliminary investigation into supportive relationships among Black women in midlife and the relativity to the singular successful accomplishment of receiving their doctoral degree (see Appendix B, Figure B1).

It was decided to quantify the study participant's communal cognitive clusters. Therefore, each participant was given two diagrams. Each had three concentric circles with the word "you" in the center. The first diagram was labeled "10 years prior" (see Appendix B, Figure B2) and the second one labeled "at the time of confirmation of degree" (see Appendix B, Figure B3). The subjects were asked to visually show how they were able to be successful through support from their own personal group of communal cognitive will cohorts by naming and placing within the appropriate concentric circle.

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7. Mary J. Levitt, Ruth A. Weber, and Nathalie Guacci, "Convoys of Social Support: An Intergenerational Analysis," *Psychology and Aging 8*, no 3 (1993): 323-326.

8. Kees Knipscheer and Toni C. Antonucci, ed., *Social Network Research* (Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger Inc., 1990), 1-76; Michael Lamb and Alexandra Freund, ed., *The Handbook of Life Span Development: Social and Emotional Development* (Hobokin, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), 1-770.

The three circles on each diagram provided place holders for those support relationships at three different levels. Names were assigned to the different levels. Those levels distinguished a hierarchy of dimensions of support. The variables that determined the place holder was the closeness, quality, and function of the relationship. During the interviews questions arose that stimulated candid responses associated with the situational demands and roles inside those relationships. After the explanation of the exercise, the recording was stopped so that the subjects could complete the diagram. Once they finished, they were advised that the taping would begin again for a thoughtful discussion about the placement of people or things in all the three circles. There was also a comparative discussion on how and why people moved within the circles throughout the ten-year span of time. This contextualized a deeper exploration of the components and interconnectedness of Afrocentric Communal Cognitive clusters. It also solidified if the study participants were aware of the Afrocentric term Communal Cognitive Cluster phenomenon and its relativity to their experience. This was an additional demonstration of support that validated the information derived from their individual acknowledgment pages from their dissertations. This analysis is discussed in Chapter IV.

Case Studies

The purposeful sampling size of five study participants necessitated the use of a semi-structured, open-ended interview, audio taped and transcribed. Creswell states "case study data collection involves a wide array of procedures as the researcher builds an in-depth picture of the case. He includes four types of data (interviews, observation,

documents, and audio-visual materials" that create case studies.[9] This study sample became a purposeful number of five, it was decided to use the phenomenological study research design approach. This design utilized the strategies of interpretive, inductive, and deductive inquiry. When discussing the use of case studies, the researcher used both descriptive and explanatory narrative inquiry[10] in connecting the shared and individual experiences. However, this researcher had some concern with the basic definition of phenomenological study given by John Creswell who defined phenomenological study as "methodology: a type of design in qualitative research that may be an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry." My challenge with Creswell's definition of phenomenological study was his use of the participants as the object of the study. I am using the participants as the "subject" and definers of the inquiry.[11] This dichotomy of objective versus subjective is one of the differences Asante speaks about when discussing using the lens of Eurocentric (mainstream) research design and Afrocentric research design.[12]

Qualitative data analysis for this study relied on responses to the semistructured interview conversations. After transcription and verification of authenticity of the

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9. John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers, 2012), 971; McDougal III, *Research Methods in Africana Studies* (NY: Peter Lang, 2014), 30-79.

10. Colette Daiute and Cynthia Lightfoot, ed., *Narrative Analysis: Studying the Development of Individuals in Society* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), x-xiii.

11. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 971.

12. James L. Conyers Jr., ed., *Afrocentricity and the Academy* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 37-49.

responses by the study participants the process of thematic analysis was started. After reading the transcripts multiple times patterns began to surface. Coding was started without a pre-established coding scheme similar to brainstorming but using the information from the interviews. Similarities, differences, characteristics and experiences that contributed to the answers to the research questions and those extraneous unfiltered conversations proved valuable when creating themes. The interview began to take on what Asante suggests cultural and social immersion as opposed to scientific distance. Therefore, in this form of Afrocentric research the researcher shared commonalities with the study participants which made the conversations flow unbiased and with sister friend familiarity. The researcher had common language, history, and experience with the subjects. This made the interviewing fluid capturing the essence of the research questions.[13] Codification began resulting in preparation for the data analysis in Chapter IV. Characteristics and experiences that contributed to the research questions and other information that could be data from the transcription of the semistructured interviews was analyzed and compartmentalized into commonalities and themes. The researcher looked within and across the narratives for similarities and differences. Key themes and important statements within the narratives were highlighted. They were developed into topics and sub-topics. There was a continuous reassessment and refinement as a part of this process. Once refined a summary was written. How one is chosen to be a part of such a personal connectedness will be discussed from both perspectives in Chapter IV as

13. Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge,* 25-28.

well as an analysis of the adapted Convoy Model to create relevancy to the Afrocentric point of view.

Once the actual interview was completed and the tape transcribed, the participant was sent the transcription for their approval. An agreement was made between the subject and the researcher that the transcription was accurate. Once that approval was obtained, the data were scheduled for analysis along with the responses from the Convoy Model.

Validation of the Study

An important feature of this analysis was validating the study for credibility, trustworthiness and authenticity. This researcher used the validity procedures of member checking and the use of reflexivity."[14] Member checking occurred in the reviewing of each subject's transcript. Once the participant confirmed the credibility of the transcript the document was set aside for future analysis. Triangulation was used to look across the data collected via the interviews, archival information and using an Afrocentric lens to determine commonalities of identified themes and categories.

Summary

The use of this hybrid research methodology illuminated the intimate authentic lens of five Black women who shared their journeys to the doctorate through self-actualization, nommo, and ma'at. Naming themselves and expressing the values they

14. John W. Creswell and Dana L. Miller, "Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry," *Theory into Practice 39*, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 124-130.

held dear in their journey. Their diverse stories were five of thousands of stories that will never be told.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

> "Until the lion has his or her own storyteller, the hunter will always have the best part of the story."
>
> Ewe-mina Benin, Ghana, and Togo Proverb[1]

Introduction

The muse for this study was Anna Julia Cooper who started and completed her doctorate at the Sorbonne while in midlife. She started at age 57 and completed at age 67. Anna Julia Cooper joins a host of phenomenal Black women who are important to this body of work. Dr. Cooper endured an academy that often disparaged and humiliated her. She also experienced isolation and marginality. There are many untold stories of Black women who were casualties of the academy. They never completed the journey. The struggle of life's experiences coupled with academic rigor may have exasperated their quest to the doctorate. Perhaps one of reasons for noncompletion was the fact that personal formal and informal support systems failed them. This researcher sought to examine the benefit of a social context of informal support to Black women from an Afrocentric perspective called Communal Cognitive Clusters. As defined in Chapter I, Communal Cognitive Clusters are the overwhelming power of a group of people supporting each other as they move towards goals that affect the total community. It is

1. African Proverb of the Month, accessed February 20, 2019, http://www.afriprov.org/african-proverb-of-the-month/32-2006proverbs/224-April-2006-pr...2/20/2019.

unity in the traditional sense of a group of people coming together to support an achievement of a single purpose. It implies that there is enhancement in a collaborative group setting that encourages the individual as an incentive to perform well. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain better understanding of Black women's perspectives on Afrocentric support factors told in their own voices. This is called nommo, the right to name and speak for themselves.

As described in Chapter III in accordance to Afrocentric and traditional phenomenological design, semistructured interviews were conducted with participants to obtain clarity on their lived experiences. These Black women were bold and courageous sharers of their life experiences in a safe space. They expressed pain, anger, frustration, laughter and joy as they discussed their victories as they ascended into the academy. The goal of this chapter is to examine and analyze the results of the queries to address the construction of knowledge from a new perspective. The Afrocentric research model as purported by Molefi Kete Asante, Ruth Reviere, and other Afrocentric scholars is the framework used to support the research questions and the lived experiences of Black women in midlife pursuing a terminal degree. The emphasis on understanding this phenomenon focuses on interconnecting primary and secondary themes. Consistent with an Afrocentric cultural orientation; family members, close friends, and trusted community members make up the study participants communal cognitive cluster. They represented the primary sources of assistance when these women experienced exhilaration, problems or concerns, and motivation related to completing the degree. These clusters helped to preserve balance and well-being. The women were able to

disclose problems and to seek help with a level of nonjudgmental confidence in the advisement.

Social relations are a key component of this study. It contributed real and significant ways to understand the far-reaching effects of the communal cognitive cluster over a ten-year period. An analysis of an adapted convoy model depicting Communal Cognitive Clusters of support was demonstrated through a hierarchy model of support, movement, and responsibility which assisted the study participants in achieving their goal. According to this model supportive persons surround the individual as they move through their lives. Some remained longer than others. The relationships varied in closeness, responsibility, and quality. The multilevel structure and function were key elements that had significant implications for the success of the participant.

The research questions were the catalyst to the study. The lived experience was annotated using a phenomenal model based on the narratives of the method in which this researcher identified the answers to the research questions through recording and analyzing the spoken word describing the lived experiences of the study participants. These experiences were mainly told in chronological order but with a comfort level that facilitated digression and the use of introspection and retrospection. This is a major tenant of Afrocentric research.[2] These five Black women recanted their lived experiences in a circular rather than linear method. They reflected on the meaning of those experiences in life course stages as they reminisced through several decades to get

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2. M. K. Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1990), 59-64.

to the conferment of the degree. The construction of abstract and theoretical narratives summarized what was being said in their own words[3] rounded out the analysis.

The overarching research question guiding the study sought to uncover the Black women's perception of the Afrocentric paradigm of support called Communal Cognitive Clusters and its relevancy to their successful completion of the process. What influence did external support have on Black women obtaining a doctorate degree in midlife? This research also addressed the following subquestions (SQ):

SQ1: What affect did being a nontraditional student have on you personally and the type of support received?

SQ2: What influence did persistence have on Black women in midlife obtaining a terminal degree?

SQ3: What and how was the support group called and described? Afrocentric or European model of support?

The first sub-question sought to explore the possible complexity of being an older nontraditional student and the ways meaning was made of the experience. The second subquestion sought to explore the challenges they faced and the strategies to overcome them. The third subquestion was meant to determine their understanding of the African perspective of communal support and its impact on how they perceived that support.

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3. Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale, *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2015), 253-254.

Use of the Adapted Convoy Model

Kobi Kambon discusses traditional African relationships that start with the family and clan. Kinship can refer to biological family members and/or community extended family members. The collective community component with group consensus supports accountability and success.[4] It is that communal collective that was indicated via the results of the individual study participants Communal Cognitive Clusters. Mutual support and assistance were illuminated as primary in the pursuit of the doctorate. Within the data obtained from the adapted convoy model there was a sense of group connectivity and coherence. Maladoma Some believes there is evidence that a healthy sense of belonging in a community or communal atmosphere leads to greater generosity, better distribution of resources and a greater awareness of the needs of the self and others.[5] You are not left to confront your problems alone. A strong community strengthens one's individuality by supporting the expression and enjoyment of one's unique gifts and talents. The community loves to see all of its members flourish and live up to their potential. Honoring and supporting its members is in the self-interest of any community.

These values are in line with the use of the Adapted Convoy model. This model addressed the hierarchical structure of social support from an Afrocentric perspective called Communal Cognitive Clusters. The original Convoy Model questions researchers

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4. Kobi K. K. Kambon, *African/Black Psychology in the American Context: An African-Centered Approach* (Tallahassee, FL: Nuboian Nation Publications, 1998), 393-425.

5. Malidoma Patrice Some, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual, and Community* (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1998), 91-92.

Antonucci et al. asked were related to social networks among older adults. This researcher asked the same questions of the study participants with the focus specifically on the doctoral process (see Appendix A). The participants were told to look at three concentric circles. The inner circle had the word YOU in the center. The respondents were asked to "Think about people to whom you feel so close that it is hard to imagine life without them in your doctoral process." These people were inserted in the innermost circle of the diagram which included the subject. The same process was used for the secondary circle which was described originally as "people to whom you may not feel quite that close but who are still very important to you." The outer circle description was also the same as the original Convoy Model question. "Describe people whom you have not already mentioned but who are close enough and important enough in your life that they should be placed in your personal network.[6] The network being the communal cognitive cluster. Each participant thoughtfully placed those persons within the diagram. Because the subjects were working with two diagrams one being 10 years before the doctorate and the other being at the time of conferment of the doctorate, movement of Communal Cognizant Cluster members was included in the analysis. Questions were asked related to the movement from one diagram to another and the reasons for removal of members or the addition of members resulting from the passage of time. Size and geographic proximity was also a consideration that may or may not have affected the frequency of contact between the subjects and their CCC members. Noted was the

6. Kristine J. Ajrouch, Heather R. Fuller, Hiroko Akiyama, and Toni C. Antonucci, "Convoys of Social Relations in Cross-National Context," *The Gerontologist 58*, no. 3 (June 2018): 488–499, accessed February 9, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnw204.

placement of children inside the communal cognitive cluster. The findings of the Adapted Convoy Model will be in Chapter V.

The organization of this chapter begins with the demographics and narratives of the participants. Actual narrative response was added to the discussion of the data. Creswell asserts that the focus of a narrative is on the life of an individual and the focus of a phenomenology is on a concept or phenomenon and the "essence" of the lived experiences of persons about that phenomenon."[7] This research methodology gave the researcher an opportunity to describe the phenomenon from her own perspective. Therefore, an autobiographical phenomenological analysis was used. The case studies were based on the lived experiences of five Black women using their retrospective and introspective lens to enhance the description of those experiences and formulate responses to the research questions. Other coding dynamics used were process emotion, value, holistic, and causation coding.[8] Each one of those coding dynamics was determined by the unique narratives expressed by the study participants.

There were several ways in which data was collected as recanted in Chapter III. One on one interviews were conducted. Each participant selected the location of their interview according to personal preference. The information was taped and transcribed. Transcriptions were sent to the participants to validate for accuracy. A thoughtful tactile exercise called the Adapted Convoy Model, a tool to determine the hierarchy of an individual's support system, was used to identify and illustrate the value of each person

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7. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design,"* 121.

8. Matthews B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook,* 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2014), 75-80.

in the participant's communal cognitive cluster ten years prior to the doctorate and at the time of the doctorate. This process was particularly useful because it allowed the study participant to openly recognize and discuss their individual communal cognitive cluster members, their functionality and level of importance to their successful completion of the doctorate. Archival research looking at acknowledgement pages from the dissertations written by the study participants gave preliminary insight as to who was a member of the communal cognitive cluster. The results of that analysis will be discussed further in this chapter in the section entitled the Adapted Convoy Model Analysis. However, some significant influences of support will be mentioned in their profiles. I am also taking the liberty to quote the subjects almost verbatim with some adherences and corrections to syntax and sentence structure within the interview. This study also coded, through the analysis of the women's interviews, the most significant themes relative to the Africana Woman's Agenda referenced in Chapter III.[9]

In analyzing the case studies this researcher observed and listened to the telling of the story and the transcriptions to create "themes."[10] The participant's narratives were deconstructed and situated within their own personal, geographic, social and historical context and location. Translating specific situations, places, epiphanies, disruptions, and movement, was indicative of the uniqueness of each narrative. Important themes in each one's life course were annotated and categorized to construct a charting of similarities

9. Clinora Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (Boston: Bedford Publishers, Inc., 1993), 14-18.

10. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design,* 72.

and differences. The researcher also reconstructed the subject's biographies and identified the factors that aided in the shaping of each individual's life.

There is some discussion using Black Feminist frames of reference on the intersectionality of racism and cultural bias. However, it is referential to the need to pursue the components of institutional racism characteristics as it relates to the discourse on Black women's experiences. Several subjects identified with this experience.

Introduction to the Study Participants

A total of five Black women who had received a Doctor of Arts and Humanities in African American Studies, Africana Women's Studies, English, and Foreign Language participated in five, sixty- to ninety-minute one–on- one semistructured taped interviews. The participants ranged in age from 55-75 and had spent 5-15 years pursuing the doctoral degree. Each participant selected the location for their interview according to personal preference. Accommodations for the interviews ranged from personal office space, library conference room, to a personal home visit two hours away. The specific criteria for the study participants were that they were (1) Black women, (2) Doctor of Arts and Humanities students at Clark Atlanta University, and (3) started and completed their doctorate while in midlife. The specific details of the participant's demographic profile demonstrate the age at the start of the degree, marital status, number of children, and their field of study (see Table 1). Of the five Black women being studied, one was married, one widowed, one divorced, and two single at the time of degree conferment. Each of the women's profile describes their background and experience detail in narrative form.

Table 1. Demographics of study participants (SP)

Name	Age at Start	Marital Status	Children	Field of Study
SP1	47	Widowed	2	African American Studies
SP2	47	Single	1	Africana Women's Studies
SP3	51	Married	2	English
SP4	55	Single	1	Foreign Language
SP5	50	Divorced	2	English

(*) Each participant was given a study ID number to protect their anonymity based on the order they were interviewed (i.e., SP1, SP2, etc.).

Clark Atlanta University was the site of interest for these Black women in midlife. The University's Office of Planning and Research (OPAR) recently started collecting statistical information related to those seeking a doctoral degree at age 45 with entry into the various doctoral programs using fall 2014 as their starting point. There were five currently enrolled students from the ages of 42-56 in the PhD Program (see Appendix C). Four were women. However, as of spring 2019 only three remained enrolled. Entry into the doctoral program fall of 2015 indicated one woman and two men between the ages of 65-68 starting the program. As of spring 2019 only three remained enrolled. Entry into the doctoral program fall of 2015 indicated one woman between the ages of 65-68 starting the program. However, in spring 2019 she was not enrolled. In the PhD program, there were nine enrolled between the ages of 42-68. In the DAH program (the same as the study participants), there was one woman between the ages of 65-68 in the disciplines of the study participants. In addition, in History there was a woman age 65-68. She was not enrolled spring 2019. These statistics do not show ethnicity however it is to

be assumed because CAU is a Historically Black College and University these women are Black. There are no White women enrolled in the Humanities doctoral program at this time[11] (see Appendix C).

Brief Study Participants Biographies

The following section provides individual descriptions of the experienced phenomenon as told by the study participants. Each narrative begins with a brief summary of the participant's background information that provides the context under which the experience took place. The narratives provided a vivid lens of the subject's experiences in the context of the phenomenon being studied.

SP1

SP1 was interviewed in a conference room. She was happy to participate and made mention that she was probably the oldest student to get her doctorate from Clark Atlanta University. Age seemed to be very important to her throughout the conversation. SP1 was married prior to the start of her doctorate however her husband died while she was in the program. He was a PhD and an administrator who worked at many universities on the east coast causing his family to move around a lot. She gave birth to several children during that time. SP1 initially had an interest in enhancing her education but not necessarily pursuing a doctorate. The primary reason was stability. The constant moving at the will of employment opportunities for her husband was a deterrent for her

11. Clark Atlanta University's Office of Planning and Research, 2019. "Seeking a Doctoral Degree at Age 45+," accessed February 7, 2020, http://www.cau.edu/opar/:;institutional=research/data reports.html.

goals; however, she admitted to taking a class or two here or there at several universities where her husband was employed. Her husband completed his doctorate during that time. It was not uncommon that Black women put their aspirations on hold to assist their spouse in fulfilling their goals first. The thought process was in the aftermath they would both have accomplished their educational goals. SP1's husband's last move for his family was Atlanta, Georgia where he took an administrative position at Morris Brown College. Sadly, her husband passed away while in that position. It was after a significant mourning period that SP1 decided to return to higher education in order to pursue her doctorate. This was also part of her healing process from the death of her husband. Her children were adults at this time. It is to be noted that there was a twenty-seven-year gap between having received her master's degree and returning to higher education to pursue the doctorate. It took SP1 fifteen years to complete the doctoral program. A serious illness required time off from the program. Because she experienced a serious illness, she required time away from the program. She was extremely grateful for the approval of her time away and mentioned this in her discussion on departmental academic support. She is currently a cancer survivor.

On being a nontraditional student: SP1 was initially concerned about being the oldest student in doctoral classes. It was at the urging of a university employment colleague that she at least go to a couple of the monthly meet ups of doctoral students that were happening on campus. She stated, "I looked at him and I'm thinking I do not wanna go to a program with all young folk." She finally acquiesced. "I attended one of those

meetings so I could see who the students were and how I would feel being the oldest in this group. So I did. One of the first students I saw was my age."

This interviewer questioned her about the importance of having intergenerational classmates. SP1 stated, "It was important to me and it was encouraging because I was already feeling a little—being an older student. I didn't want to be the **only** older student" (interview by author, Atlanta, GA, June 6, 2015). Within the year of that experience, SP1 enrolled in the Doctor of Arts and Humanities program at Clark Atlanta University.

SP2

SP2 was interviewed at a local library of her choice. Shortly after starting the interview in a corner of the library we were asked to relocate because our conversation was a distraction to the patrons who were using the library. There were no private rooms available. These accommodations had been arranged by SP2 because it was in close proximity to her home. We were able to finish the interview on another day at another library with appropriate accommodations. SP2 appeared to be anxious about the interview but began to relax as we got into a conversational type discourse. She seemed to avoid the question of marriage. There was never a definitive answer to the question. We did not pursue it because it appeared to have no value to the discussion. SP2 did have an adult son. Years after leaving her home state and small town of Mississippi and residing in New York for a short while she was encouraged by a friend to continue her education. It was felt that she would have better opportunities to improve her economic and social status the more educated she became.

At that time, it had been ten years since SP2 completed her bachelors. She had been indecisive about continuing with a master's program until that conversation occurred. Ironically her son was deciding to begin an undergraduate program. He was accepted at Clark Atlanta University. This motivated SP2 to move from Mississippi and obtain employment at the university. This would prove advantageous for her as the policy of the University stated that children of employees could get tuition waivers as well as employees who wanted to complete a bachelors or master's degree after two years of employment. This was quite appealing to her so the decision to move to Atlanta was not hard to make. The idea of both she and her son in college was appealing to her. She also decided after one year of employment to begin a master's program without waiver assistance because she was motivated to get started and wanted to take full advantage of her personal motivation. All of her stories regarding gaps and completions of education centered on her being indecisive and a procrastinator. It is interesting to note that one of the gaps in the time to complete her doctorate was her experience of the loss of her dog and companion. She was extremely close to the family pet and was devastated.

On being a nontraditional student: SP2 had no problems with being a non-traditional student. She actually took pride in it.

> I was a non-traditional student when I went back to finish or to start in all of the degrees. There were other nontraditional students that were in class with me. I never felt like I was the only nontraditional student in terms of age. There were other people that were my age that were coming back to school to finish up their degrees. Of course, most of the people were younger than me but there were a few nontraditional students which I always found helpful that I could hang out with them and do things with them and we could get the lessons together and so forth.[12]

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12. SP2, interview by author, Lithonia, GA, June 20, 2015.

Particular to the DAH,

> I was the standout in a lot of classes in terms of being the oldest in the class, but I always had the support of the younger. They were respectful. A lot of them actually looked to me when they wanted something. If they wanted something done, they would always make me the leader of the pack. So, that happened a lot all through my undergraduate, my masters as well as the doctoral program.[13]

SP3

SP3 was an African woman from Lagos, Nigeria who had lived in the United States since age eighteen. This subject invited me to interview her in her own well accoutered home in Alabama. It was more conducive to her allocation of time. It was also a comfortable familiar surrounding for the one on one interview. From all observable indicators including neighborhood, home, car, amenities, she and her husband worked very hard to maintain upper middle-class status. SP3's parents were professionals. Higher education was a requirement not a choice in her family. Her siblings were all professionals located worldwide from Africa, Dublin, Ireland, London and the United States. Their professions included a geologist, doctor, and entrepreneur. All were married to professionals. It is to be noted that one of her brothers and a significant communal cognizant cluster member passed away during her journey to the doctorate. SP3 was also married to a person who was a successful professional. He was a persistent motivator for her. "…my husband was just wonderful. He told me that you always said you were going to go back now do it… so when you get ready, just go ahead and do it."[14] He also began working on his doctorate. They were partners in the process.

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13. SP2, interview by author, Lithonia, GA, June 20, 2015.

14. SP3, interview by author, Birmingham, AL, June 27, 2015.

Her children grew up during the process and were very supportive of her. They also were college graduates.

SP3 experienced institutional racism in academia when she attempted a PhD program at a Historically White Institution (HWI) in Alabama. When submitting the title of her dissertation, she was told that it was "too Black" and would not be supported. This discouraged her and caused her to seek affirming at an HBCU. She chose Clark Atlanta University where the subject matter for her dissertation was well received.[15]

Professional promotional opportunities were very important to this participant. She had already made quite a name for herself at the University where she was employed. She had advanced quickly through the professorate with the encouragement and assistance of significant mentors. Obtaining the doctoral degree was the last component to her success. She became department chair before completion of the doctorate. This also accounted for her movement through the doctoral program with such speed and determination. It is to be noted that she was in the process of a Master's of Fina Art (MFA) in literature when she started the doctoral program at CAU. She received her MFA while she wrote her dissertation.

On being a nontraditional student: SP3 was asked the question "how did it feel being a student of what would be considered a non-traditional? Did you feel any anxiety…because some of the students were in their twenties and thirties? Her response was,

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15. SP3 shared her in depth experience with the intersection of academic racial profiling and bias toward her research. This incident was outside the scope of this study's research which focuses on the Africana Womanist theoretical framework; however, it is worthy of further investigation.

> Maybe at the beginning some anxiety, but later, I really feel it's very important, especially for historically Black colleges, because that was coming from the perspective of some experiences in the workplace. And also how to mentor the younger ones because we have to pass the baton at some point, so in that light, some of the younger ones, I've been able to just talk to them and say, here's my experience in life that you probably have no clue about now and hopefully leaving a mark that may help them.[16]

SP4

SP4 was interviewed in a conference room at the Robert Woodruff Library on the Clark Atlanta University campus. It was very difficult to find time for this interview because she was very busy and lived part time in another city. SP4 was a little guarded and agitated when we met because there was miscommunication regarding her appointment time. This made her arrival almost 30 minutes beyond the expected time. The interview setting was very tense initially because she was irritated and anxious to make up the thirty-minute delay and finish as quickly as possible. There was also an obvious element of apprehension. We went immediately into the introduction segment of the interview with her rolling of eyes and major sighs. Perhaps there should have been a few minutes to holistically settle into the task at hand with a breathing exercise. It took approximately 20 minutes into the interview for SP4 to begin to relax as we had a "sisterhood" moment. Her body and facial expressions changed from a furrowed brow to a slight to full smile as we ruminated through the past. By the time we got three quarters through the interview with some retrospection and introspection about her days as an activist at Spelman College and our mutual interests in Black women in midlife, the setting was cleansed of the negativity held at the beginning. We agreed to collaborate on

16. SP3, interview by author, Birmingham, AL, June 27, 2015.

a mutual interest at another time. It is to be noted that this emotional rollercoaster did not affect the flow of responses to the questions. She was a bit curt in the beginning with her responses to the initial question of marriage. She was almost monosyllabic. She also responded with a very matter-of-fact tone: "I was not married, so I was single." This later translated to "I've been divorced so long that I consider myself single." However, her ex-husband was very active in their daughter's life. Her daughter, an adult at this time, was also very involved in her life as a part of her communal cognitive cluster giving support in various ways including being a care giver. SP4 considered herself a social butterfly at the time of starting the DAH program. She had retired from a major airlines shortly after starting the doctorate program. She was very active in the Atlanta social scene even after starting the doctorate program. It was not until she was diagnosed with breast cancer during her program that she states the following:

> I shifted away from being at every event inside the city, being a socialite. I became tuned into the fact that I may not be on this earth very long and there were some things I needed to do. So, I made the shift from fun and a socialite to becoming more involved at Big Bethel AME Church. I had to find a place of reassurance and a place to calm me down.[17]

Due to time constraints, the question of being a nontraditional student was not asked.

SP5

I interviewed SP5 in a conference room of the Africana Women's Studies Department. SP5 was very reserved and continued to need reassurance that she was going in the right direction with the questions and responses. She sat very straight and tall in her chair at all times. Never leaning forward or changing her physical position

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17. SP4, interview by author, Atlanta, GA, July 18, 2015.

except for occasionally pushing her glasses back up on her nose. She was very thoughtful about her answers, pausing in retrospection and carefully choosing her words before continuing with her responses.

SP5 had been divorced since 2004. She and her husband were separated for approximately ten years before the divorce. However, she stated that he was helpful in her move from California to Atlanta. Her two children also grew up during the process. She came from a family of nine and was very independent. She was a descendant from a family that were proud but of meager means. She and her siblings grew up to be very independent. Her reason for getting the doctorate degree was career motivated. She had been teaching on the high school level for 27 years and wanted to teach full time in higher education. She kept applying for positions but was never hired even though she was always one of the top two or three candidates. She felt race had a lot to do with her inability to progress.

> There were very few Black teachers in my school. In fact, the second school I worked in I was the only African-American in my department…There were only maybe three or four Black teachers on that campus. The first school I taught in I was one of the first Black teachers hired. The community college district just was not welcoming of Black faculty. They just were not hiring us. And I thought that was one reason I was not being hired because they could use the excuse, I didn't have a masters in English. They would hire the young White teachers' right out of college usually. I decided to go back to school because with a doctorate they wouldn't be able to use the excuse that I did not have a degree.[18]

On being a nontraditional student: When asked the question related to being a non-traditional student SP5's face lit up as she exclaimed that

> I had a great time. I really enjoyed it. I have always enjoyed being a student. It was a joy to be here. We formed a very close-knit group, my colleagues and I in

18. SP5, interview by author, Atlanta, GA, July 30, 2015.

> these classes…Many of the students in the doctoral program were older, in fact a couple older than I was. …The professors, I felt they respected my position more because I was an older student and also because I was a former teacher. I really enjoyed the exchange with the professors. So that worked out very well.[19]

Summary

The purpose of the profiles of the five study participants was to provide an understanding of the contextual details that shaped and influenced how they made meaning of their lives and the pursuit of the doctorate while in midlife. It also demonstrates the intertwining of their support systems, their Communal Cognitive Clusters and their successful completion of the doctorate.

All the women in this study, their lived experiences as Black women, mothers, and career women were tied into their pursuit of the doctorate degree. Despite the time to completion and critical circumstances there was no deterrent that forced these strong Black women to become part of the statistics of non-completers. It is with the help of their communal cognitive clusters and institutional support that they accomplished their goal. The majority are still in the field of education.

Participants' Educational Profile: Age and Time from Start to Completion of DAH

As presented in Table 2, the sample shows the inter-correlation of age at the beginning and end of the doctoral process as well as the relationship of time from the start to the completion of the degree for the entire sample.

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19. SP5, interview by author, Atlanta, GA, July 30, 2015.

Table 2. Age at start and time to degree with lag time explanation

Subject	Age Started DAH	Age Completed DAH	Year Started Program	Year Conferred	Reason for Lag
SP #1	47	62	1996	2011	Health issues
SP #2	47	55	2005	2013	Within reason, average years to complete doctorate is 7
SP#3	51	55	2009	2013	Early completion; motivated by career
SP#4	55	65	1996	2006	Health issues
SP #5	50	58	1999	2007	Within reason, average years to complete doctorate is 7

This sample is not being used to suggest that this is the normal process for the completion of the doctorate degree while in midlife. It is a microcosm that stimulates the interest to conduct a longitudinal study of Black women pursuing the doctorate degree while in midlife.

All subjects started the degree process while in midlife as the criteria for this study stated. This transitional age was also discussed in Chapter II referencing the start of midlife as age 45. Midlife is also a transitional stage in the life course to refocus on decisions related to career change and possible educational goals. All the women in this study were transitioning to better economic opportunities and fulfilling bucket list goals and objectives. It appeared that these goals were personal intrinsic goals with an emphasis on generativity and role modeling for future generations within their family and extended family communities. All participants continued to work in the field of

education during and after the conferment of the degree. One subject becoming the chair of a department at a university.

Table 2 also shows the variances in reasoning for the lag in completion of the program, if a lag existed. The Doctoral Initiative on Minority Attrition and Completion studied twenty-one institutions of higher learning to understand the completion and attrition rate among underrepresented minority students. The data base is the largest of its kind to date. It was created to better inform University Deans via the Council of Graduate Schools on doctoral completion and attrition rates. One of the foci from the findings from thirty institutions focused on Black student cohort groups that started their doctoral programs in 1992-1993 and 2003-2004. The findings indicated that there was a ten-year completion rate of 47 percent for Black/African-American students in the social sciences. It is apparent from this report that the attrition rates nationally in post-secondary educational institutions the completion rate of ten years is the norm whether Historically Black Colleges and Universities or Historically White Colleges and Universities; 46 percent of the total number of study cohorts in the study completed their doctorate in seven years while 57 percent completed in ten.[20]

Table 3 shows the correlation of the time it took the study participants to matriculate from their bachelor's degrees to the Doctor of Humanities degree. The longest gap being twenty-nine years.

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20. Robert Sowell, Jeff Allum, and Hironao Okahana, *Doctoral Initiative on Minority Attrition and Completion* (Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools, 2015), 14-31.

Table 3. Educational gaps in years

Study Participant	Years Gap in Start BA	MA	DAH	Reason for Gap (s)
1	No Gap	No Gap	27	
2	2 Years immediate, then 10 years to complete	7	No Gap	Immediately went from MS to DAH program
3	No Gap	No Gap	29	Career
4	No Gap	7	22	Career
5	No Gap	No Gap	25	Career

There was a significant amount of variance with SP3 who had the longest gap between her master's degree and the DAH; however, as shown in Table 3, once she started the program she took the shortest time to complete her program.

Intersectionality of Gender Bias and Institutional Racism

There were indicators of institutional and gender bias among two of the study participants. SP3 encountered institutional bias in the form of a racialized experience with the Chair of her dissertation committee at a predominately White institution. This caused her to leave the institution. She experienced isolation and marginalization perpetuated by a faculty member. This racial microaggression directed toward this student became allegations of her oversensitivity and a denial of racism. The case in point was the subject matter of her dissertation that was disturbing to her Committee Chair. When submitting the title of her dissertation, she was told it was too Black and would not be supported. SP3's dissertation incorporated her well documented African aesthetic. This type of microaggression is described as, "including the everyday verbal, non-verbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or

unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages often perpetuated by well-intended peers, faculty, and supervisors at individual and institutional levels."[20] It was a crisis of legitimacy. Students who experience this often drop out or transfer to another university. SP3's decision came from the collective response from her personal communal cognitive cluster that collectively advised her to leave that university. She concurred. It was the collective decision that she was to leave that university and explore a HBCU.

SP5 also experienced the intersection of gender bias and institutional racism. Her situation differed from SP3. SP5 taught in a public school system for 27 years but could not seem to get a full time teaching position in higher education. She was passed over by many although she was one of the top candidates. She inferred that racial bias had a lot to do with her inability to progress: "They would hire the young White teachers right out of college. I decided to go back to school for a doctorate so they wouldn't be able to use the excuse that I did not have a degree."[22]

This feeling of invisibility could have created potential passivity in those spaces that held no value or regard to equity. This is another example of isolation and marginalization that comes from racial microaggressions. She experienced racism in spaces that professed to have a commitment to diversity and inclusion. Both SP3 and

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21. Brian S. Hubain and Evette L. Allen, "Counter Stories as Representations of the Racialized Experiences of Students of Color in Higher Education and Student Affairs Graduate Preparation Programs," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education 29,* no. 7 (2016): 3.

22. SP5. Interview by author, Atlanta, GA, July 30, 2015.

SP5 were overcomers. These strong intellectual Black women had experiences that could also be addressed with in the structure of Black Feminist critical race theory.

In summary, these five Black women's narratives add new information to the extant body of literature on Black women pursuing the doctorate in midlife. All are overcomers from health issues to the intersectionality of institutional race and gender bias. This phenomenon affords the reader the opportunity to use the words and behaviors of those women who have actually experienced the phenomenon as an example. Their reflection on family, communal cognitive clusters of support, academic, and self-efficacy, goals, and outcomes along with common themes increase the possibility that others may relate to their experience and be motivated to apply them to their own individual experiences.

CHAPTER V

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of five Black women who obtained their doctorate while in midlife. This was an exploration into the use of an Afrocentric concept of an informal support system called communal cognitive clusters to assess the potential impact on success. Chapter V provides insightful details regarding the experience of the participants and how the use of the Adapted Convoy Model revealed information on their individual Communal Cognitive Clusters. The chapter also summarizes the results of the study, a discussion of the results, including the limitations, recommendations for future research and the conclusion.

The methodology was an Afrocentric qualitative inquiry that used the conceptual frameworks of Afrocentricity, Africana Womanism, and Black Feminism as the philosophical approaches for analyzing the data. This protocol used interviews and a tactile exercise using the Adapted Convoy Model of relational support to frame the responses. This analysis counted the responses as testimony to the women's own lived realities as they discussed their experiences in completing the Doctorate in Humanities. This chapter also highlights primary conclusions to this study taken from the research and proposes recommendation for future research. Central themes and the essence of the women's experiences that emerged from the data are also presented in this chapter.

Results of the Study

This research found that even with the small sample, Black women were not monolithic. Each woman's narrative and community or communal cognitive cluster was different. These differences emphasized variation in barriers to timely and/or delayed graduation completion rates. Those barriers included health, family, institutional racism, and bias. These case studies are a reminder of the continuing need to understand the nature of the task of producing doctoral degrees, analyzing the life course of Black women and to confirm the Afrocentric construct of communal cognitive clusters as part of a framework that can embrace the complexity of midlife Black women pursuing the doctorate.

The research also found in the responses of the participants an indication that there were significant cultural and political components when they gave detailed accounts of the challenges, barriers, and accomplishments during the journey to the doctorate. In Evans' work, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower,* she gave detailed accounts of the challenges and accomplishments that Black women endured in higher education as they pursued the doctoral degree. The obstacles reported were also related to the muse of this study Anna Julia Cooper. These 20th century obstacles gave insight to the similar personal challenges she had as a Black woman in higher education pursing her doctorate while in midlife.

While these study participants shared their stories, it became evident that they made meaning of their lived experiences in similar but not identical ways. The response to the research questions and the secondary themes found in this study seem to indicate

problems of educational debt that was accruing because of time to graduation, balancing competing responsibilities, and dealing with the academic community. There were also significant health challenges that doctoral students in midlife may encounter. However, despite these challenges they still viewed their educational experience as a vehicle for self-improvement. They believed they had become better mothers to their children by being a role model of persistence and tenacity. This is how they held on to their inner strength and resilience in order to face those challenges. They were extremely grateful for the assistance from their personal communal cognitive clusters of support. The participants appeared to maintain a level of balance with a sense of channeling energy to continue by virtue of generativity passed down to them from ancestral memory. It also was a mechanism to analyze the life course of Black women confirming Asante and Hudson-Weems' Afrocentric constructs of Communal Cognitive Clusters and Africana Womanism as frameworks that could embrace the complexity of support systems for Black women pursuing the doctorate while in midlife.

The objectives of the study were to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Black women in mid-life adopt the decision to re-enter higher education?

RQ2: How do the women in this purposeful study interpret their support networks using the terms and definition of Communal Cognitive Clusters?

RQ3: How is time to graduation affected by active Communal Cognitive Cluster support?

RQ4: How does the intersection of being Black and female in midlife and a non-traditional doctoral student impact the completion of the doctorate?

Adapted Convoy Model

The Convoy Model is a social relationship model which was originally used in the study of aging to understand the impact and consequences of social relationships throughout the lifespan.[1] The Adapted Convoy model analysis was the catalyst to emphasize components of the eighteen qualities of the Africana Woman's Agenda as stated by Clenora Hudson-Weems. Every woman's story emphasized the responsibilities and what it meant to be an Africana Woman. How each woman fulfilled each component was also demonstrated as they charted and then explained the hierarchy of the model of their personal communal cognitive clusters.

The findings in the Adapted Convoy Models of ten years prior to the doctorate and at the time of the doctorate (see Appendix B, Figure B2) indicated that there were no significant differences in the number of people in their models. However, placement of members varied in number within the hierarchal circles of influence. Compared to the last circle in the scheme, the inner circle of support always contained a predominance of family members. The center of the circle that has YOU inside it is usually joined with a composite of family members and very close extended family. There was only one variance that indicated only one person in the center circle. It was an indication of that person having a close caregiver relationship. There are indicators as expressed in

1. Toni C. Antonucci, "The Convoy Model: Explaining Social Relationships from a Multidisciplinary Perspective," *The Gerontologist 54*, no.1 (2013): 82-92.

Chapter IV that this dependency could have been a component for non-completion. However, in this case the roles were reversed because of health challenges. The support became singular support for tangible and intangible needs. Additionally, there did not seem to be a large number of friends in all models, but a lot of associates that were scattered inside the other circles. Major concerns over the ten-year span of time within the individual models also varied. There were some untimely deaths of significant relatives and the death of a dog which was as painful as the death of family members. So painful that it caused a significant break in their writing activities. It is also significant that age had nothing to do with the death of those family members and friends. In all probability it seemed most were due to complicated long- and short-term illnesses. It did bring about a sense of the study participant's own mortality and the need to quicken the pace of completing the doctorate.

Geographical distance over time caused significant changes in communication. It is to be noted that the years of the study participant's academic journey was not a time when social media was available for communication. Most of the study participants had known their CCC years before the time frame of the study. The friendships and associations ranged from 3-30 years. Some of the dimensions of those friendships included: hometown affiliations, family, work, school, and church. Organizational and institutional affiliations were also included. The frequency of contact was organic. It was mainly on an as needed basis. Gender of the participants had very little to do with the levels of participation. Reliability was the main indicator. One of the main components of Africana Womanism is working in unison with men.

There was also the question of consistency of support with an Afrocentric cultural orientation. Family members, close friends, and trusted community members made up all of the study participant's Communal Cognitive Cluster. They represented the primary tangible and intangible sources of assistance when these women experienced exhilaration, problems or concerns; and was motivation related to completing the degree. These clusters helped to preserve balance and well-being. The women were able to disclose problems and seek help with a level of nonjudgmental confidence in the advisement (see Appendix D, Figures D1 and D2 - Actual SP5 Adapted Convoy Model).

Nontraditional Students

Concern for being a nontraditional student did not prove to be frustrating or create feelings of discomfort. The natural social process of being a new class member carries with it an initial uneasiness for most students who are unfamiliar with their classmates. These mature women did not show any long-lasting issues with being the oldest in the classroom. Some looked forward to the comradery and the acknowledgement of being the "elder" in the class. There was a feeling of being welcomed into the classroom and at times becoming an advisor and leader for class projects as well as personal advisement to many of the younger Black women in the class. It became advantageous to be the elder student in the class according to many of the narratives. Many of the study participants viewed their relationships with the younger classmates as an expression of generativity and often viewed themselves as leaders and mentors.

Gaps in time as illustrated in Table 1 (Chapter V) indicated that from the start of higher education to the accomplishment of completing a terminal degree was determined

by several factors. In the case of these study participants, the main factors for delayed completion were health issues. Even though some of the participant's time to completion took over ten years, there were valid reasons for the delay. According to statistics, attrition and failure to complete has become universally an institutional problem. Scholars have begun to address those issues with research and suggested ways universities can mediate their attrition rates. The PhD Completion Project, which was a study sponsored by the Council of Graduate Schools in 2010, found that faculty and the administration had a big part to play in the attrition rates.[2] The testimonials of the study participants in the current study clearly indicated that those were not a reason for their slow matriculation. Holistic interventions and conversations of encouragement deterred the possible urge for them to leave the program.

Gaps in time from the start of higher education to the accomplishment of completing a terminal degree has often been determined by several factors. The report on Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities indicates the median time to degree of U.S. doctorate recipients by broad field of study as follows: 1995-2015 from 1995-2008 the time to degree for those in the Humanities leveled off at ten years, then there was a slight fluctuation from 2008-2009. However, it remained steady at nine years to completion from 2011-2015. The proportion of doctorates earned by Blacks or African Americans rose from 6.2 percent in 2005 to 6.5 percent in 2015.[3] Table 1 (Chapter IV) shows that

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2. Joyce B. Main, "Gender Homophily, Ph.D. Completion, and Time to Degree in the Humanities and Humanistic Social Sciences," *The Review of Higher Education 37*, no. 3 (2014): 349-375.

3. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. The Condition of Education 2017: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities, accessed February 7, 2020, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_svc.pdf.

fluctuation occurred with the study participants who all started their degree program after 1995 and finished in 2013. So, while the time to graduation seemed to be inordinately slow, statistics showed that there was an issue with graduation rates in all the fields of study except education which went from 16 years to completion in 1995 to 12 years to completion in 2015. The majority of the study being documented showed participant's years to graduation were well within the universal ten years to completion of the doctorate. The number of earned doctorates for African Americans went from 8,527 in 2004-2005 to 13,278 in 2014-2015, a 55.7 percent change.[4] These study participants are in that data.

The Completion Project foci was primarily on attrition rates and time to degree from an institutional standpoint. This could also be a possibility why Black students select Historically Black Colleges and Universities for the holistic attributes combined with the academic rigor. The findings in the Project study also suggested that there were "six institutional and program characteristics as key factors influencing positive student outcomes that could ultimately affect the likelihood that a particular student will complete a PhD program."[5] There was no mention in the study of any outside elements that could have helped contribute to positive graduation rates such as departmental and community support groups. This study discusses communal cognitive clusters as a transformative source of support. It is inclusive of components of university departmental and informal community support.

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4. The Condition of Education 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_svc.pdf

5. Ibid.

This was not the case in this small sample of study participants. Overall, they appreciated being admitted to the program and were satisfied with the assistance and encouragement they received from faculty and staff during their time within the doctoral program. It is to be noted that 60 percent of the cohorts in this small study finished in less than ten years. It is also to be noted that one participant completed the program at a faster rate. Her motivation was an academic promotional opportunity predicated on the completion of the degree. The other study participants revealed somewhat different patterns that were affected by health issues that occurred in the dissertation stage. In sum, career motivation and the challenges of the positive and negative aspects of health influenced not only well-being but the time to completion rates for this small sample.

Primary Theme: Africana Womanism

Africana Womanism is a contextual framework purported by Dr. Clenora Hudson-Weems in her seminal book, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. She created a listing of characteristics with historical relevance and definition that she termed the guiding principles. She never intimated that all Black women should subscribe to the concept but that they should at least be aware that their actions toward family and their relationship with men was of ultimate importance and had relevancy to Africa and Afrocentrism. Her diatribe against Black women's support of feminism in any form was controversial. She made a strong case on the differences between the theoretical frameworks.

Although the concept of Africana Womanism is not as prevalent in academic discourse as it was in the 1980s -1990s, it is still relevant to this discussion. The

attributes identified through the study narratives validate this conceptual framework. The study participants demonstrated in their individual lived narratives that they led an Africana Womanist lifestyle. Most of the characteristics were verbalized within the narratives, however the recognition of how their actions relate to Africana Womanism was initially taken as an everyday occurrence. It was when the question of Africana Womanism's guiding principles was a part of the dialogue with the participants especially when their individual communal cognitive clusters were being analyzed the conversation became one of acknowledgment and affirmation. Within the retrospective phases of the conversations the characteristics of Africana Womanism came to the forefront as if a new relatable discovery was being made of something that was done naturally without any thought of the historical memory or reference to why it was done. It appeared to be more of an understanding of the term and its relevancy to African history that was the clarifier. Since all the participants were from the Humanities Department and three received their doctorates in Humanities and the Arts with a concentration from the department of African American Studies, Africana Women's Studies, and History, the concept was not new but the theoretical framework was only incorporated in one course of study along with other Africana concepts. It was not until there was a discussion related to the Communal Cognitive Clusters and the utilization of the Adapted Convoy Model that revived their understanding of the principle concepts that created dialogue.

Not only are these women practicing Africana Womanism but one could also overlay or superimpose the seven core principles of an Afrocentric worldview that is

stated in the Nguzo Saba created by Maulenga Karenga in 1988. The principals include unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith.[6]

Nommo an African cosmologic term is defined in many ways but the emphasis here is if the person is named correctly, they will come into existence. This component refers to a Black woman knowing herself. It is Weems' context that states that the African woman has always been the mother and companion. Her identity has withstood the experiences of time both positive and negative. It is also written that she holds on to the memories of family and does not acquiesce to others' controls. The strength and victory of African women is inherited to those who are in the diasporic realm wherever that might be. It is an imperative to respect those Black women who have set the standard for the 21st century Black woman. It is a Queen Nzinga, Nanny of Jamaica, Sojourner Truth moment of reflection that strengthens and encourages Black women to continue the acknowledgement that they can do anything they put their minds to and people must respect that.

All of the women interviewed showed through their narratives most of the components of Africana Womanism. They were also connected via a common cultural heritage that spoke to a shared history of slavery, subjugation, oppression and the affirmation of racial pride. They did not subscribe to masculism by virtue of their sharing equitable space with Black men in their lives be it husbands, ex-husbands, sons, and male

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6. Nubian Sun and Sandra Starks, "Nguzo Saba as a Framework for Mentoring Black Female Students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)," *Journal of Colorism Studies 3,* no. 1 (March 30, 2018): 1-9.

friends. They all had a consciousness of liberation from finishing the degree. There appeared to be an emergence of some sense of the liberation of their own personal communities. Some would say that that is a Black Feminist concept that emerged from the dialogue. They were now Black women in the academy who had survived collectively. It was a spirit of collectivity that gave space for the stories to be told with pride and passion. These women were liberated from a common challenge. There is a sense of freedom when one can self-name themselves within the well-defined cultural and political paradigms of Africana Womanism and Black Feminism. Both can be defined as a mosaic or a sense of defined shared space across the diaspora.[7] These women acknowledged the terms persistence, resistance and a reclamation of power that aligns with both concepts. It is to be noted that if these women were to be labeled, they preferred to be labeled Africana Womanist. Black Feminist was not a term they cared to use based on their understanding of the framework.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain better understanding of Black women's perspectives on successfully completing the doctorate while in midlife. The utilization of CCC support systems were primary contributing factors to their successful completion of the doctoral degree in Humanities. This chapter identified the findings derived from analysis of transcribed interviews with five Black women who received their doctorate in Humanities. As such, findings associated with the research questions identified that participants were primarily influenced by those in their communal cognitive cluster over the ten-year period. Those participants included family,

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7. Venus Evens-Winters, *Black Feminism in Qualitative Inquiry: A Mosaic for Writing Our Daughter's Body* (London: Routledge, 2019), 14.

extended family, university peer colleagues and staff. It even identified an animal that was a close companion to one of the study participants whose death during the writing of her dissertation created a blockage in her writing capacity because her grief overwhelmed her. However, she as the other participants persisted to the end.

Marriage, Children, and Health

There was limited probing into the marital history and status of the women being studied. The women who were married had been with their spouses for years. For some by midlife it appeared that their long-term relationships were either over or in trouble. For others the relationship ended in the death of their spouse. SP3 appeared to have an extremely supportive marriage based on her description of the comradery and the supportive idea of returning to school together. This appeared to be a partnership marriage. They were able to grow both individually and together as they pursued their mutual goals. It appeared from the conversation that they still continue to develop an open and equitable relationship. Some respondents just replied in the affirmative that they had been married and now they were divorced. There was also a death of a spouse. This researcher received an indignant response from one participant that made the researcher know not to pursue any more questions of that nature. It was evident that the one whose husband was living found her marriage to be a very supportive one. The discussion of the Convoy Model gleaned more information about all participant's marital relationships.

It was interesting that four of the study participants had very solemn faces when discussing their marriages, but their faces lit up when discussing their children. SP3

spoke of her husband and family in a very appreciative tone of voice indicating that they all had such prominent roles in her success. Without their encouragement she would have persisted but possibly because of the career aspect of the journey. Positionality and status were tempered with humility. It appeared that all received unconditional support from their children throughout the process. Some were consulted when technical issues were identified during course work. Others were motivated by them to start their master's program and emphasized the need to continue with the doctorate. Even SP4 who maintained a stormy visage of the struggles to maintain motivation softened with the conversation about her daughter. Everyone had children and all the children were extremely supportive. All study participants had one to five grown children who were teenagers and then college students when their mothers started the program and completed the program. There was no need to source a babysitter as some younger women would have to do in order to attend school. SP 1, 2, 3, and 5 worked either full-time or part time throughout the process. SP4 retired shortly after starting the program. There were occasions when four of the participants were adjunct professors at Clark Atlanta University which was also the location of their studies.

SP3 was unique within this group when it came to the education component. She was employed at a university when she started and had the opportunity to be promoted to the Chair of a department pending the receipt of the doctorate. She had established herself with the University and was well recognized for her work. She also completed an MFA program in 2011 while she was working on her doctorate. She chose CAU because it was a HBCU which gave her an opportunity to write her dissertation from an

Afrocentric perspective. This was not acceptable, and no support was given at the predominately White institution she was attending.

Health and Well-Being

The majority of the women in this study were in good health during their doctorate journey. During the course of SP1 and SP4's journey, it took 10 and 15 years to graduate due to health challenges that required chemotherapy and radiation treatments. This created quite a setback in continuing and finishing their studies. But they both were overcomers.

Good health is equated with positive well-being. In the African concept health refers to a state of positive mental and physical well-being. It is considered the normalcy of health marked by no disease. The World Health Organization holds that health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Health is necessary for the maintenance of physical and spiritual well-being. From this perspective Africans see health as the normal state in which individuals attain their best, thereby contributing toward the greater social good. Health is understood as a state of well-being. Well-being refers to the state of fulfillment whereby both the individual and society are spared from mental and physical discomfort and enjoy peace of mind. Disease hinders an individual to perform her duties as expected by society. Any occurrence has an explanation. Health is also linked to a state of peace and serenity considered well-being. A good state of health is naturally concomitant with stability that covers human beings and nature. It brings peace and happiness. The state

of good health also relates to success and prosperity in all spheres of life. In the African experience good health is harmonious in the concept of communal living.[8]

In the majority of cases the study participants had a relatively good state of well-being thanks to their Communal Cognitive Clusters support. Even when there were challenges the CCC's were the sources of stability and trust. There are also many social factors that created health challenges for two of the study participants. Multiple responsibilities generally create stressors that can lead to health challenges. However, conversations both near and far, telephonically and in person were strong positive components to the often challenging process of health versus the doctorate. The dissertation process is one that requires concentration and stamina. When asked, none expressed regrets, however there were times of indecisiveness. This was where the CCC was most helpful.

Two participants went through breast cancer during the dissertation process. Statistics maintain that Black women are more likely to be diagnosed at later stages and have the lowest survival at each state of diagnosis. SP4 attested to the fact that she had late stage breast cancer and stated in her interview:

> Question: If I ask you what inspired you to persist in your studies what would it be?
>
> Response: It would be the breast cancer…it's probably the best thing that happened to me...I was so very ill and the numbers that were given to me (stages) suggested that I would not be able to live because I was in the wrong percentile of those who live.[9]

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8. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama, eds., *Encyclopedia of African Religion* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009), 310-312.

9. SP4, interview by author, Atlanta, GA, July 18, 2015.

Various responsibilities with children, work, changes in lifestyles, and predisposed heath challenges only exacerbated the uncertainties of the dissertation process. This included the extreme challenges of the medical treatment protocol. SP4 also found the disease to be a challenge particularly when the doctor's diagnosis was devastating and seemed unsurmountable. The assistance from family and peer relationships were positive aspects that helped these participants work through the devastation of the disease. Her individual communal cognitive cluster presented the supportive foundation that helped her overcome and proceed to the finish line. SP4 had an epiphany about her health challenges.

> SP4 attested that the health challenge gave her a new outlook on life because she was doing everything but studying. …what started my movement back to school was the breast cancer because I was so ill, I was thinking well you need to get this bucket list together. …the change here is like the bucket list was the illness. It was the catalyst for all.[10]
>
> Question: If I ask you what inspired you to persist in your studies what would it be?
>
> Response: It would be the breast cancer…it's probably the best thing that happened to me...I was so very ill and the numbers that were given to me (stages) suggested that I would not be able to live because I was in the wrong percentile of those who live. My position was that I'm going to see if I can live past those numbers and see if I can challenge myself since it's not a given that I'm going to live…so why not push myself to get through school and that's what I did.[11]

The Black church was one of the foundations that supported the healing process of SP4. The Black church has always been a refuge for Black people particularly for the sick. SP4's religion and faith in God as the one spiritual entity she could depend on for

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10. SP4, interview by author, Atlanta, GA, July 18, 2015.

11. Ibid.

her healing helped her endure her serious illness. She became much closer to her church community who stood in solidarity with her throughout her illness. Her mantra was "On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand; …it was a big shift from being fun and a socialite to becoming more involved in church. I had to find a place to hold me down."

Currently this university's emphasis is on the graduation rate. Time to graduation is being strictly enforced. The leniency given to the women in the study was a holistic demonstration of empathy that used to occur in HBCUs; however, due to university national report cards that look at time to degree, statistics have created a very stringent programmatic point of view. Ten years is the maximum time of completion for the doctorate degree; however, special circumstances for the study participants prevailed during the span of time under discussion. Both women had stage 3 and 4 breast cancer during their studies. SP2 and 4 could have made a decision to be non-completers due to health issues. But they chose to persist. Currently they are still survivors.

Encouragement

This thematic code of encouragement refers to the variety of support and re-enforcement evidenced by the Communal Cognitive Cluster diagramed exercise conducted by the study participants. These women revealed that they believed they could successfully enroll in a doctorate program because they had the support of family, friends, the church, and support from faculty and staff at the institution they attended.

Encouragement is often overlooked and viewed as an intangible source of assistance; however, a few scholars have documented its importance in the scholarly literature.[12]

Generativity

Even though only one of the study participants commented directly about generativity it is clearly important particularly in the African-American community. Generativity is defined as "an adult's concern for and commitment to the well-being of younger individuals, and is expressed through parenting, teaching, mentoring, and other activities aimed at establishing one's legacy to the next generation."[13]

SP3 was asked the question, "how did it feel being a student of what would be considered a non-traditional? Did you feel any anxiety…because some of the students were in their twenties and thirties?"

> Maybe at the beginning some anxiety, but later, I really feel it's very important, especially for historically Black colleges, because that was coming from the perspective of some experiences in the workplace. And also how to mentor the younger ones because we have to pass the baton at some point, so in that light, some of the younger ones, I've been able to just talk to them and say, here's my experience in life that you probably have no clue about now and hopefully leaving a mark that may help them.[14]

African Americans have a legacy of "multigenerational kinship, resilience, spirituality and hope that is passed down generation to generation."[15] This often goes

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12. Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher, ed., *African American Females: Addressing Challenges and Nurturing the Future* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 172-186.

13. Chanee D. Fabius, "Toward Integration of Narrative Identity, Generativity, and Storytelling in African American Elders, *Journal of Black Studies 47,* no. 5 (July 2016): 423-434.

14. SP3, interview by author, Birmingham, AL, June 27, 2015.

15. Fabius, "Toward Integration of Narrative Identity," 425.

beyond the immediate family and includes the extended family. It also appears in the giving back via volunteering to various youth/teen organizations that may be gender specific or not. It is an effective way to teach children about their heritage and the life experiences of the person practicing generativity. It is a way to pass down traditions, values (maat), and guidance. It continues the contribution of legacy to African/African-American culture. This process usually happens when adults reach midlife which is an introspective/retrospective period of the life course.[16] It is a time of reflection on the preservation and strengthening of family and community. It is also a time when one's mortality begins to be examined.

Persistence

The percent of Black women earning a doctorate degree in 2014-2015 was only 21 percent. It was stated that approximately half of all PhD candidates never finish their program. The statistics also showed that only 40 percent of African-American students who started a PhD program finished it.[17] To understand Black women's propensity to persistence one must acknowledge that she is a self-namer that defies the negative conotations of persistence, resistance, and the reclamation of power within family, community, and the world. These study participants have shown that they alone define themselves as to who they are despite attempts to stifle them as academicians of worth. They are self-definers who have taken on the mantle of responsible citizen of the world

16. Ludwika Wojciecjowska, "Subjectivity and Generativity in Midlife," *Polish Psychological Bulletin 48*, no. 1 (2017): 38-43.

17. Affordable Colleges Online, Accessed February 7, 2020, https: www.afordablecollegesonline.org/college-resource-center/doctoral-programs-womenofcolor.

as they conquered the academy while taking their family responsibilities seriously. They have been determined to be a role model for them and those to come. These strong intelligent Black women scholars have defined their own reality that revolves around the sense of community and family. They have responded to the membership of a collective who put their trust and support in their ability to successful despite all the statistical odds of failure, to complete the doctoral program.

Africana Womanism

Africana Womanism is the action of rendering knowledge regarding Black women's collective consciousness of self-healing, communalism, and female bonding that does not exclude men was the emphasis gleaned from the narratives of the study participants. Their Communal Cognitive Clusters formed the sacred space for self-restoration and self-discovery. Their meaningful journey to the doctorate dispelled the myth of invisibility. Their unifying cohorts helped to strike a balance between academics and life's experiences. It respected their own family units no matter how large or small and specifically was centered on positivity no matter the geographical context. This exploration gave a human touch to the definition of successful matriculation no matter the time it took to graduate. Through the help of their CCC there was much needed consciousness raising that only those who support the struggle for self-fulfillment could understand. It was the success of the study participant was the success of her individual communal cognitive cluster whether they knew each other or not. It was a matter of authentic, honest, trustworthy friendships of Black women and men that made the journey tolerable. It is the creative force of unity whether from people in ancestral form

or physical form that filled the void within this rite of passage. Hudson-Weems' eighteen characteristics were seen within each of the five women's stories. The Adapted Convoy Model truly identified the social space for Black women that exemplified success. Although Hudson-Weems never intimated that all Black women should subscribe to the concept, she admonished that they should at least be aware that their actions toward family and their relationship with men was of ultimate importance and is of an Afrocentric nature. Each study participant was asked if they knew the term communal cognitive cluster or will. All denied knowledge or use of the term but after discussion of the concept they agreed that this was significant in broadening their individual knowledge base when it came to the Black woman phenomena. The attributes of Africana Womanism identified through the study narratives validate the conceptual framework. Study participants have determined by their individual lived narratives that they led a mosaic of Africana Womanist and Black Feminist lifestyles.

Most of the characteristics were verbalized within the narratives, however the recognition of how their actions related to Africana Womanism was initially taken as an everyday occurrence. When the question of Africana Womanism's guiding principles and the Afrocentric framework of communal cognitive clusters was placed within the retrospective interview conversations there appeared to be more of an understanding of the term and its relevancy to African history. The discussion opened the dialogue about the specific dynamics of their personal Communal Cognitive Clusters as it related to the Africana Womanist characteristics. There was also explanatory discourse about how the utilization of individual Communal Cognitive Clusters for support affected their journey

to the doctorate. The conversation yielded acknowledgment and affirmation. Also, within the retrospective phases of the conversations the characteristics of Africana Womanism came to the forefront as if a new relatable discovery was being made of something that was done naturally without any thought of historical memory or any question as to why it was done. It was not until there was a discussion related to the communal cognitive clusters and the utilization of the Adapted Convoy Model that revived their understanding of the principle concepts.

Conclusion

Developmental and exploratory research for learning about Black women is essential. The main goals of this research were to describe, explain, and predict so that Black women in midlife can optimize their plans for the future to include higher education as a reasonable and doable goal.

The Afrocentric, Africana Womanism, and Black Feminism perspectives are still relevant frameworks as Black women should not be labeled but welcomed into a mosaic of ideologies to frame and discuss the issues relevant to this study. The practices associated with these frameworks is critical because it not only focuses on a cultural analysis but also political issues of microagression and invisibility imposed against several women in the study. It is a study of the empowerment of Black women. From an interpersonal perspective it is important for women to connect to friends and other social networks. The exploratory concept of Communal Cognitive Clusters showed both strength and the power of people supporting each other for the good of all. The research on Black women in midlife is still new. It is a reclamation of the power of Black women

in which knowledge of self becomes progressively applied and tested in various situations they encounter. It is a recognition that Black women are multifaceted individual mosaics. Their lives are not monolithic. The current era is one of rapid change that is propelled by technological innovation and ways to communicate. The ultimate beneficiaries can be Black women of all ages and from all walks of life.

Recommendations

This study presents a baseline of information on Black women's Afrocentric support system, Communal Cognitive Clusters, in obtaining the doctorate. I recommend that a diverse comparative study be done of culturally diverse women in midlife who are experiencing the same phenomenon to see if there are cross cultural differences in the construct of personal support for success in higher education. Also, one could comparatively examine the results from Black women in midlife at Predominately White Institutions (PWI). This study should also be replicated and expanded to include Black male doctoral students in midlife.

The entry into higher education in midlife is the future of enrollment issues in colleges and universities. The population will increase substantially within the next decade. Institutions of higher learning should recalibrate their current structures and curriculums to include the technology and flexibility needed for this demographic of students. This should provide an increase in the institution's bottom line and increase economic returns for those students coming back to improve their futures economically and esoterically. It will be a win-win for all.

Limitations of the Study

This researcher's study discusses communal cognitive clusters as a transformative source of support. The study included some narrative on institutional departmental and informal community support. This could be pursued further as institutional and non-traditional types of mentoring will be an asset when considering the enrollment of this population of nontraditional students.

Closing Statement

These were the case studies of five incredible Black women who started and completed their doctorate degrees while in midlife. Though this was a small sample, there is indication that the Afrocentric concept of Communal Cognitive Clusters once recognized, proved to be vital to these women's successful completion of the degree. It was proven that persistence and the Africana Woman's way were significant themes that were threads throughout the study.

Ultimately, the findings revealed that even though the participants' encountered challenges while pursuing their doctorate those barriers were overcome through their personal tenacity and individual Communal Cognitive Clusters of support. What was especially revealing about the stories these women told was that regardless of the barriers they encountered, they all found their wings and ultimately succeeded in earning their Doctor of Arts and Humanities.

Epilogue

I submit that it has been documented that Dr. Anna Julia Cooper's (the muse for the study) early communal cognitive cluster might have been the Grimke's. There are numerous accountings of association with Ida B. Wells, often referring to her as a contemporary of Dr. Cooper. During Dr. Cooper's years in undergraduate school it is significant to know that she was an older undergraduate student. In 20th century codification she would be categorized as a "nontraditional" student. Though brief there is indication that she was focused on her studies and not the frivolities of younger coeds during her college years.[18] I contend that this historical mirror was reflected in this study as the experiences of the study subjects were analyzed.

18. Karen Baker Fletcher, *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper* (New York: Crossroad Publications, 1994), 1-215.

APPENDIX A

Researcher's Interview Script

Introduction

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to investigate the phenomenon of Black women who re-enter higher education in midlife by starting and completing terminal degrees of doctorate and the impact of social support networks on successful completion. This exploration will demonstrate this phenomenon from both a mainstream and Afrocentric perspective. There is a concern for the paucity of published research on the intersection of social support networks and the educational success of Black women in midlife who have returned to higher education. This paucity also exists in the Afrocentric literature.

Type of Research Intervention

This study will require you to:

Use an adapted Convoy model included and explained to demonstrate your narrative.

You will be provided with a copy of your individual transcript to review and verify the information that was recorded during your interview.

Explanation:
The convey model is a mainstream model that conceptualizes social relationships which are multi-dimensional. Individuals are surrounded by supportive others or a protective layer of people who move with them throughout the life course. They vary in closeness, quality, function (aid, affirmation, exchange), structure (size, proximity) and personal (age, gender, and situational role demands, norms, values).

This model defines relationships and their relativity to successful life span development and accomplishments. The term convoy means a protective layer of family, friends, and in some cases, neighbors and work colleagues who have played a role in supporting your success. Do you have any questions before we get started? The Study Participants took approximately 20 minutes to fill in their Adapted Convoy Models.

Researcher's Outline for basic questions and probing for additional answers as the opportunities for expansion of the conversation

Questions for the study participants:
Demographics:
Married/single/working f/t/or p/t:
Working while attending school – explain:
Age you started degree:
Where did you earn you other degrees?

- Tell me about your journey in higher education starting with undergraduate studies
- Did you have any gaps in time to graduate from either undergrad to graduate study? What delayed your return to college?
- As a non-traditional student tell me about your decision to return to higher education.
- When and how did you arrive at the decision to pursue a doctorate degree.
- What inspired you to persist in getting your degree?
- Did you encounter any difficulties? Who or what helped you get through it?
- What was your experience as a non-traditional student?

Discussion of the Adapted Convoy Model

- What support system attributed to your success while pursuing your doctorate degree?
- How was your support system utilized? (Daily, monthly, etc.) What mechanism was used to communicate and how often did you communicate with them (i.e., phone; e-mail)
- Did they live in the same city?
- Was your support through any structured programs/organizations?

Let's discuss the support systems that were in place.

- Let's look at your convoy model and compare 10 years ago and at the time of your conferment.
- Who or what was your social support network in undergrad, graduate school and the doctorate?

- Looking at your model are the same people in both models? If not, why?

- Let's discuss the roles of each of your communal cognitive cluster members.

- Looking at the members who are not in the model "at the time of conferral of the degree," what created the disconnect between the model of "10 years prior to the doctorate?"

- How did the movement of members from the model to another occur?

There are a myriad of models of mainstream social support expressed in the literature today. Afrocentricity supports a concept called "communal cognitive clusters" in its African worldview of social support. The African worldview adds unique value to the mainstream elements by adding the elements of attunement to nature, harmony, and spirituality; this added synergy enhances longevity, mental and physical health and all other characteristics that define relationships and their relativity to successful life span development and accomplishments. I define it as a community of women/or men working as a collective community. Black existentialism centers on the "I am because We are." Could you use that definition for your support system? How?

How did your decision to return to higher education impact your personal life? Professional life?

Did you ever consider not completing your degree?

What advice would you give other Black women in midlife who are thinking about pursuing their doctorate degree?

How do you define family?

How do you define community?

Describe your persistence to succeed.

Motivation and motivators to earn the doctorate

- What made you decide to pursue a doctorate in midlife?

Asante views mainstream sociological and psychological concepts as inept at describing the African American experience or worldview. He describes social support networks in terms of the Afrocentric paradigm of communal cognitive clusters. What is your view on the use of the following terms in describing your experience?

- Resilience/determination: how were you sustained going through the process?
- Spiritual/physical/emotional support
- What was the impact on your personal life and how did Communal Cognitive Clusters affect that?
- Did your need for support increase or decrease when you became ABD? How and why?
- Were your cohorts/peers a part of your communal cognitive cluster network?
- What were some of the unexpected obstacles? How were you supported?

Those are all the questions that I have. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for your candidness.

APPENDIX B

Examples of Convoy Model

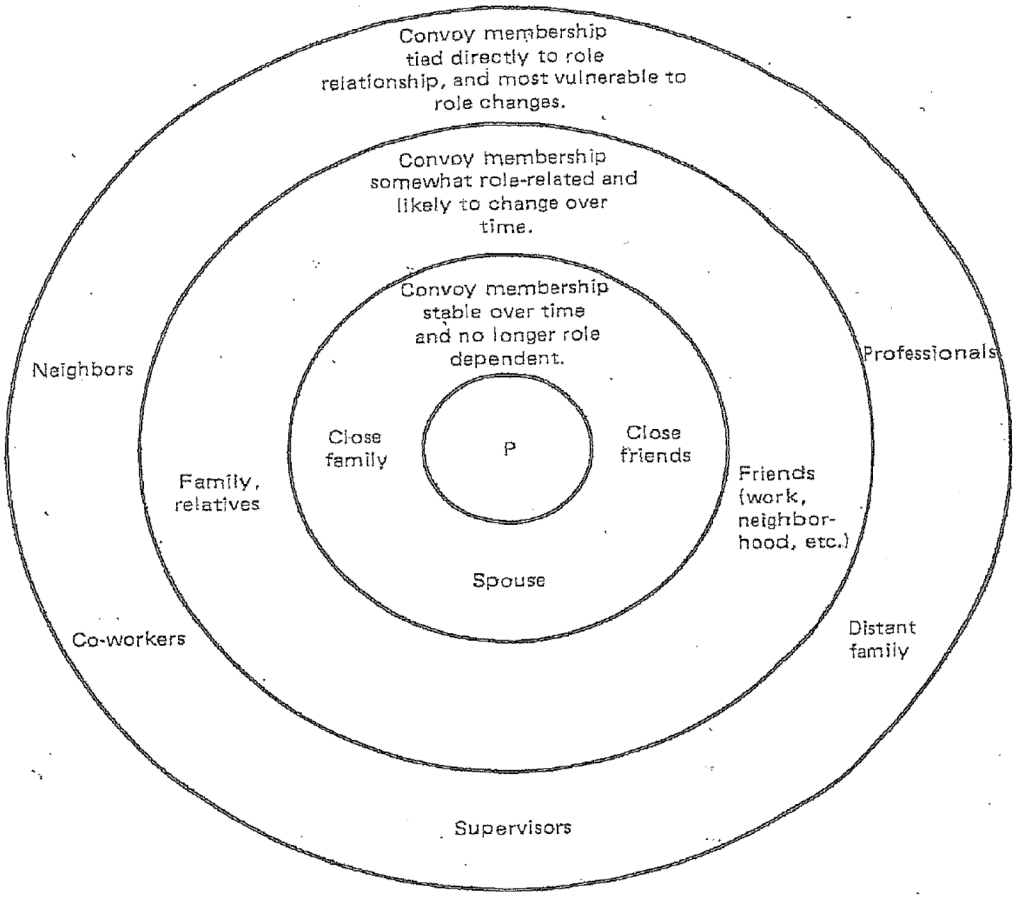

Figure B1. Hypothetical example of a convoy.

Social Support/Communal Cognitive Cluster Adapted
Convoy Model

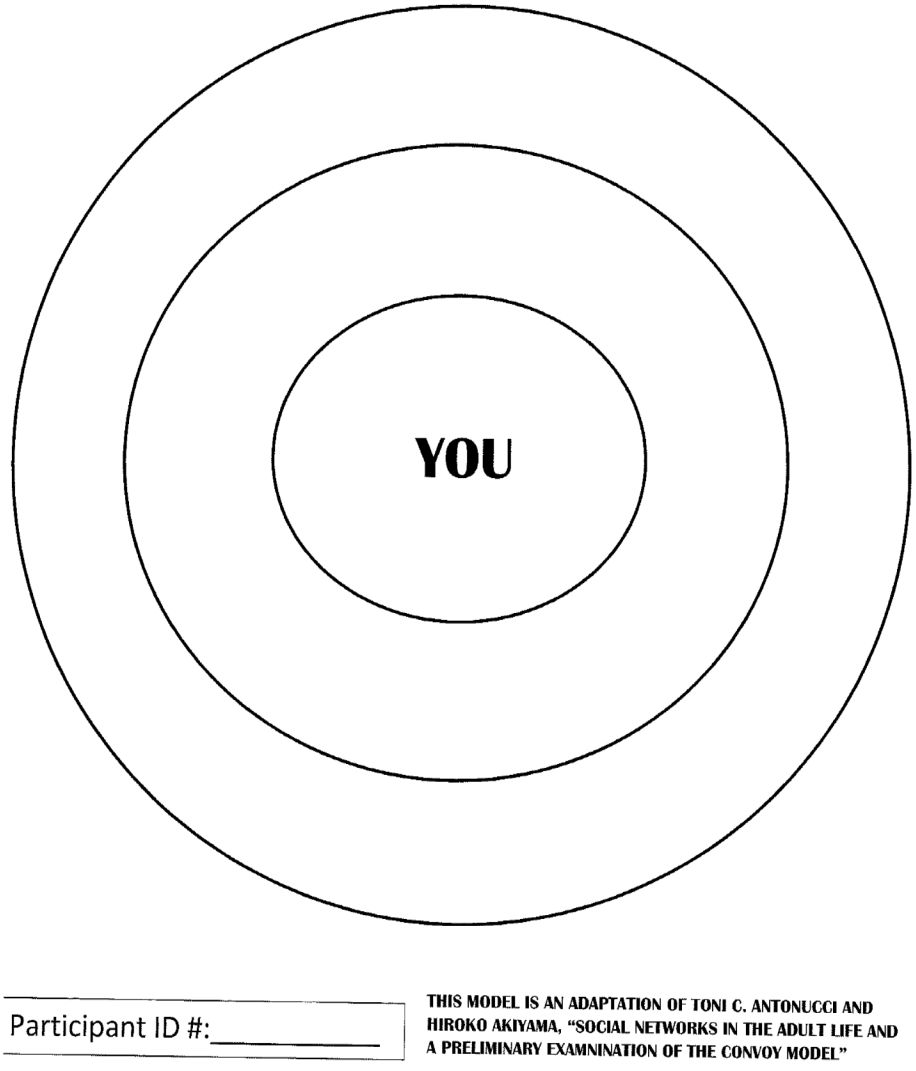

Figure B2. Convoy Model: 10 years prior to doctorate degree.

Social Support/Communal Cognitive Cluster Adapted Convoy Model

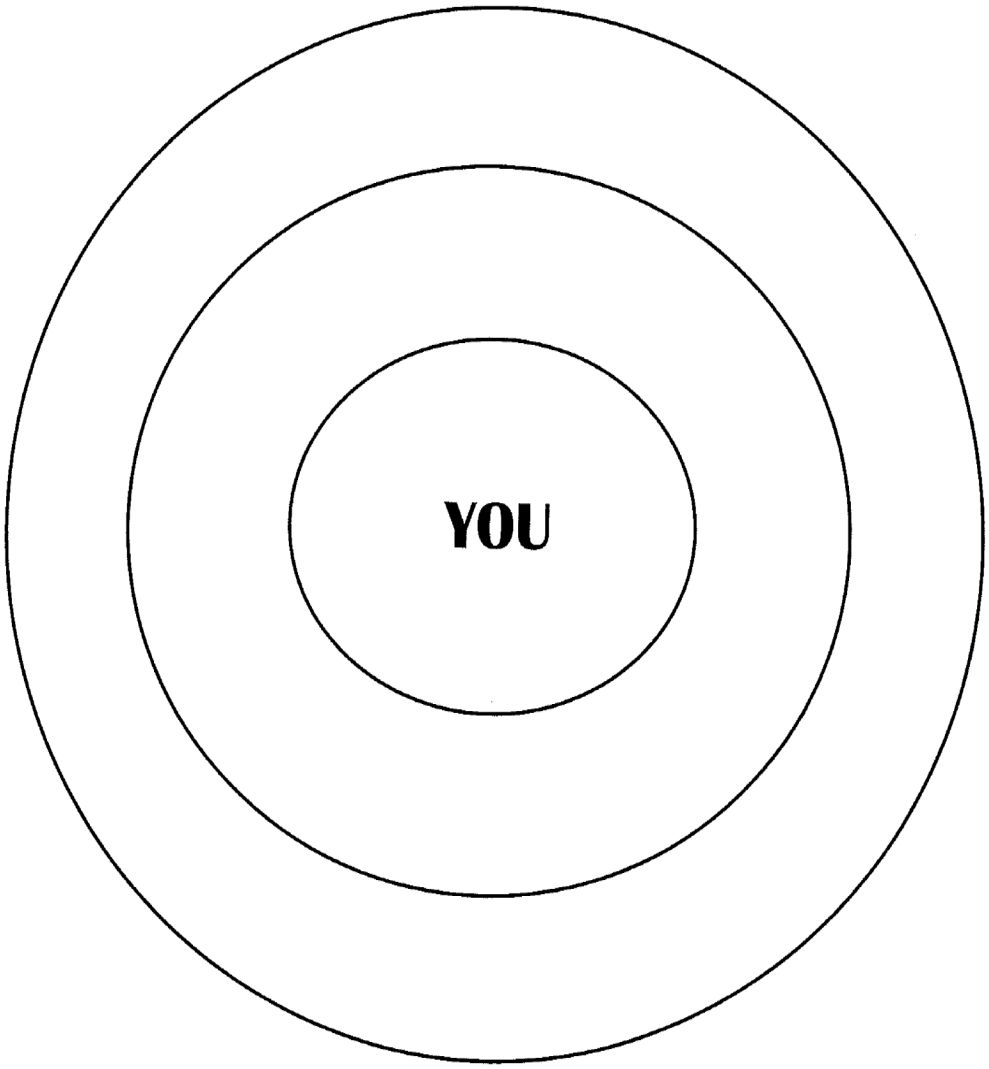

Figure B3. Convoy Model: at the time of conferral of the degree.

APPENDIX C

Seeking a Doctoral Degree at Age 45+

This table reflects data for first-year graduate level students seeking doctoral degrees from Clark Atlanta University at age 45+ In terms Fall 2014, Fall 2015, and Fall 2016.

Entry Term	Degree Type	Program	TTL	M	W	Entry Age Range	Currently Enrolled (as of Spring 2019 term)	No Enrollment*	Completed the program (as of 2017-18 Graduation AY)
Fall 2014	Doctor of Philosophy	Biology	2	1	1	50-56	1	Spring 2015	0
		Romance Languages	2	0	1	42-47	1		0
		SW Policy Plan Admin & Soc Sci	2	0	2	49-53	1		1
Fall 2015	Doctor of Arts in Humanities	History	1	0	1	65-68	0	Spring 2016	0
	Doctor of Philosophy	Political Science	1	1	0	42-47	1		0
		Romance Languages	1	0	1	46-49	1		0
		SW Policy Plan Admin & Soc Sci	6	2	4	45-56	5	Fall 2018	0
	Doctor of Education	Educational Leadership	1	0	1	47-52	1		0
Fall 2016	Doctor of Philosophy	English	1	1	0	45-50	0	Fall 2017	0
		SW Policy Plan Admin & Soc Sci	1	0	1	47-52	1		0

Source: Clark Atlanta University Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research.
Note: "Entry Term" references the term the students were confirmed as first-time graduate doctoral students. All data are as of The official university enrollment census date for the referenced entry term.
*Indicates when the student that is not currently enrolled begun to have no enrollment.

APPENDIX D

Actual SP5 Adapted Convoy Model

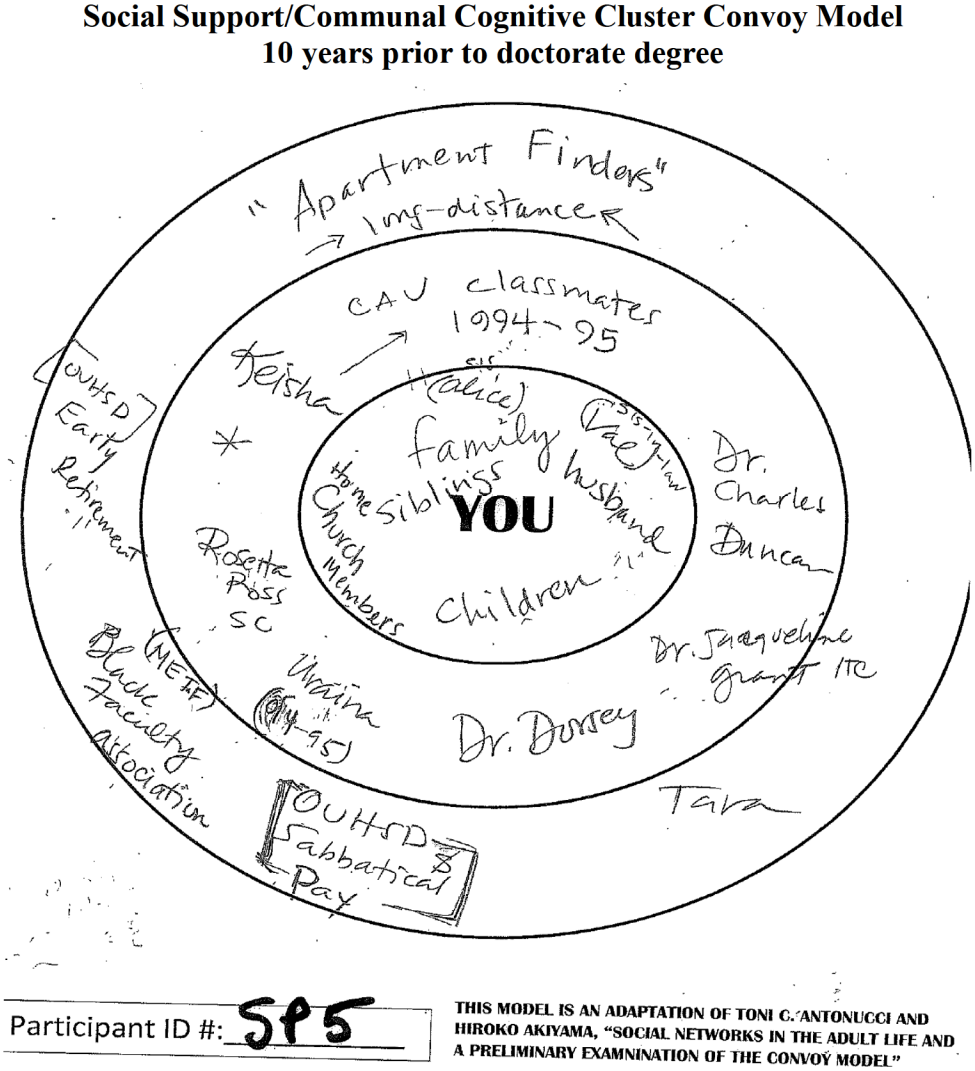

Figure D1. Study participant 5 (SP5): Adapted Convoy Model 10 years prior to doctorate degree

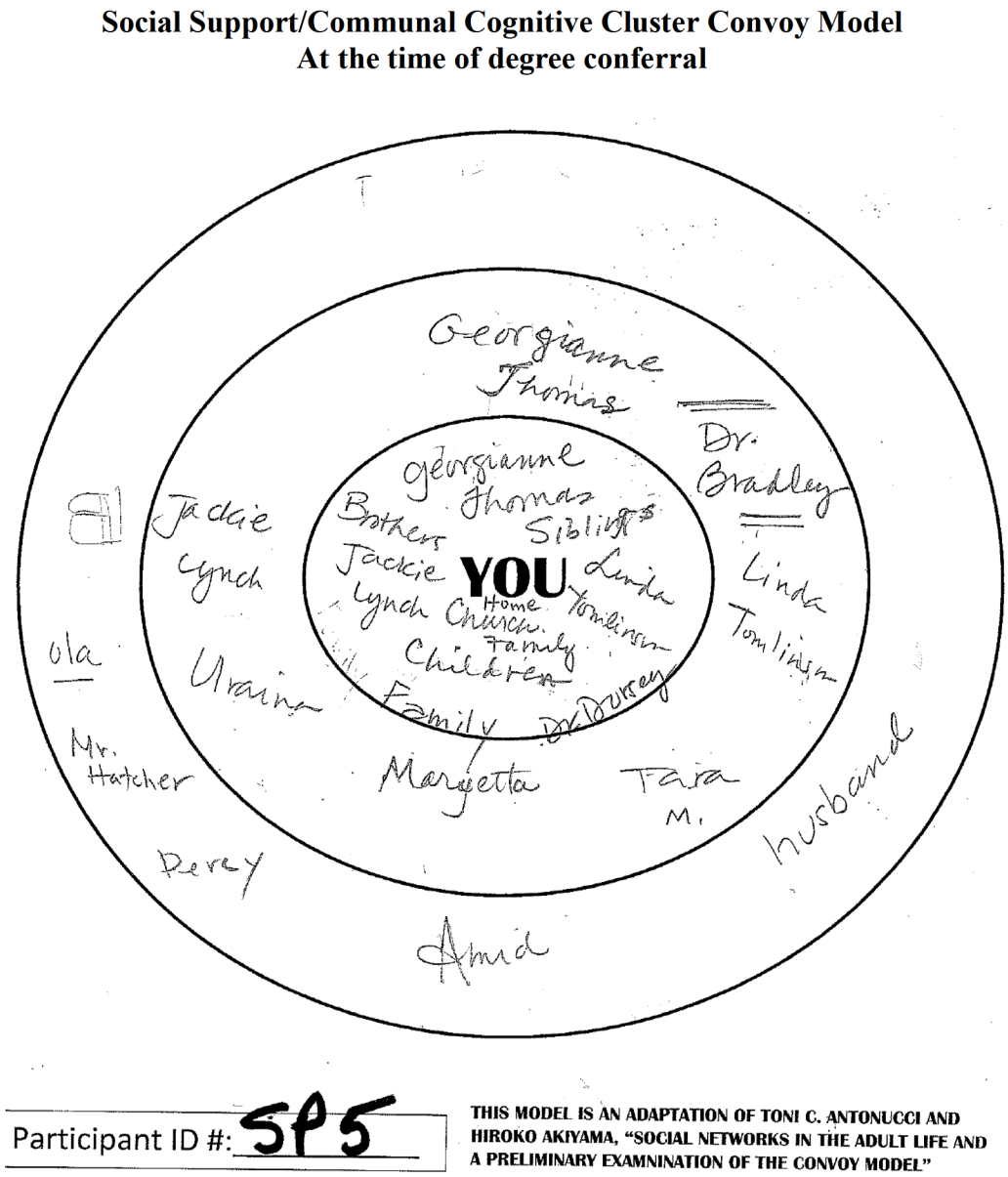

Figure D2. Study participant 5 (SP5): Adapted Convoy Model at the time of degree conferral.

APPENDIX E

Clark Atlanta University IRB Approval Letter

CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
Office of Sponsored Programs

August 12, 2014

Ms. Gayle K. Watts <gwatts@cau.edu>
Department of Africana women's Study
Clark Atlanta University
Atlanta, GA 30314

RE: African American Women Who Start and Complete their Doctoral Program After Age 49: The Impact of Social Support Networks on Success

Principal Investigator(s): Gayle K. Watts

Human Subjects Code Number: HR2014-7-543-1

Dear Ms. Watts:

The Human Subjects Committee of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your protocol and approved of it as exempt in accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).

Your Protocol Approval Code is HR2014-6-543-1/A

This permit will expire on August 12, 2015. Thereafter, continued approval is contingent upon the annual submission of a renewal form to this office.

The CAU IRB acknowledges your timely completion of the CITI IRB Training in Protection of Human Subjects – "Social and Behavioral Sciences Track." Your certification is valid for two years.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Georgianna Bolden at the Office of Sponsored Programs (404) 880-6979 or Dr. Paul I. Musey, (404) 880-6829.

Sincerely:

Paul I. Musey, Ph.D.
Chair
IRB: Human Subjects Committee

cc: Office of Sponsored Programs, "Dr. Georgianna Bolden" <gbolden@cau.edu>

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